

The Ghost of The Noble Six

by ClusiveC

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Summary: Noble Six survived Reach. The story doesn't end on a barren landscape, burned to glass. The story doesn't end with a team of Elites. But that was just step one. The war is still going on, and there's no time to look back. There is a new battlefield. A strange ring that has an ancient evil hidden within it. And Six is ready.

1. Chapter 1

****The Ghost of Noble Six.****

****Part One.****

* * *

><p>I clung to my mother's leg, closing my eyes tight. Tear drops fell down the side of my cheek, blending in with the constant rainfall from above. We moved in line with everyone else, boarding the civilian evac transport. Lightning strikes flashed in the background, illuminating the ruins of Elysium city. The city was a hell. Covenant ships glassed Elysium and the air reeked of dead corpses. Over a hundred innocent people were in the line behind us.

"Mom, i'm scared!" I cried out, holding onto her, afraid to let go. She placed her hand on my head and bent down to kiss me on the forehead.

"It's going to be alright, baby. You just have to be brave." She said reassuringly. I didn't want to be brave. I didn't want to leave home.

_The line up the stairs into the evac transport moved slowly. Overcrowded. A flight attendant was ushering people inside. From where we stood, I could see that the inside of it was packed. A gust

of wind pushed my wild black hair into my face, obscuring my vision. I shook it off. Me and mama were next to go in._

_"I'm sorry ma'am, but we're full. We can't take anymore!" The flight attendant yelled over the sound of the intense storm. The line behind us erupted into a chaotic riot, demanding for entrance into the last evac ship. People were shoving, pushing, going crazy. _

Mama begged the flight attendant to let us on, but he wouldn't. He said that he was sorry and that there wasn't any more room. Then mama begged for him to take me.

"No!" I yelled.

* * *

><p>I woke up inside the cramped cryotube, my eyes immediately adjusting to the light inside the cryobay. All of my senses came back to me instantly as I came out of the frozen state. The tube hissed as it cracked open slowly, and the HUD inside my helmet came to life. Everything was a bright silvery color. The walls. The floor. The ceiling. Just as I remembered it back when I first fell into the deep slumber of cryo sleep. A red light on the ceiling was flashing brilliantly, pasting the room with a light red color. I flexed my hands and legs.<p>

"Sorry 'bout the sudden thaw, Lieutenant, but we don't have much time. We need you up and going." I heard a voice say over the loudspeakers inside the room. Young. Smart. Scared. I looked up into the control room and saw a navy crewman on the control table, speaking into a microphone. The crewman looked no more than 20 years old.

The cryotube opened all the way, and hot air rushed inside the cold interior of it. The newly fitted MJOLNIR R variant, or Recon, was a major upgrade from the armor that I was used to, and always kept a standard interior temperature. I grabbed the sides of the cryotube and hauled myself out, making a loud _thump_ on the floor as I stepped down. My muscles slowly gained their strength, the result of being frozen inside a cryotube for so long. I flexed them, scanning the cryobay. All of the cryotubes were closed and empty, save for one that held the wounded Spartan II sniper.

"The Captain needs to see you on the bridge, Six." I looked up into the control room.

"What's going on?"

"We're under attack. Covenant boarding craft, lots of them." The crewman said. "We don't have much time before shit goes to hell."

I nodded towards him, and turned, heading for the opened exit door. I glanced over my shoulder once, wondering whether or not to ask about the spartan II. No time. I moved to the exit, quickly. As I stepped into the hall, the ship shuddered and shook, and I had to brace myself on the wall to keep from falling. A small fire was flickering alone inside the hall, and the panel coverings on the wall were blown off and destroyed. A dead ODST lay in the center of the room in a pool of dark blood. An MA5B assault rifle rested on the floor beside the ODST, slightly smeared with dried blood. I waited for the ship to

stop shaking, and then I walked over to the ODS'T and picked up the assault rifle. There were no clips for it, and the ammo counter read 47 rounds remaining. Enough to get me to the bridge. I took the time to grab the dogtags off of the ODS'T, another set for the collection, along with Jorge, Kat, and Emile. I read it and put it away.

Up ahead, the hallway branched off in several directions. I wasn't familiar with the layout of the ship, at all, so I read the signs on the walls, following the arrows as they directed me to where I needed to be. Left. Right. Keep straight. I moved down several hallways, but hadn't come across a fight yet. Just a bunch of dead ODS'T's and marines, and jackals and grunts. Up ahead was the clinic. There was gunfire, both Covenant and UNSC. The radar picked up multiple tags, friendly and enemy. I moved quickly, rounding a corner and aiming the assault rifle.

There was a team of marines defending the clinic from a group of jackals and an elite. The jackals had their shields overlapped, creating a nearly impenetrable phalanx. An elite major was behind them with a plasma repeater, firing over their heads. They hadn't seen me, their attention completely focused on the marines. I fired in 3 round bursts, nailing the Covenant troops from their right flank. Blood splattered and one of the jackals collapsed to the floor, clutching its throat where the bullets had hit. The ammo counter dropped to 38. The elite major growled and turned its attention to me, shooting a hail of hot plasma in my direction. I evaded, diving and rolling across the floor. Blue plasma marked the wall just behind where I'd been standing.

Rising back to my feet, I was already firing and moving, strafing to the right. The elite's energy shields flickered but held. One of the marines lobbed a frag grenade, tossing it towards the jackals. It bounced off of the shields, unable to get behind them. I moved forward, still firing at the elite as the grenade exploded.. The concussion knocked the jackals back, causing them to lose their balance. The energy shield on the elite finally flickered away and died, leaving it vulnerable. A mist of purple blood ruptured from it, pasting the walls and floor. It fell to its knees, fired a final plasma round, and died. 17 rounds left in the assault rifle. The jackals were hit by a volley of bullets from the marines, unable to withstand the firepower without their formation. A pile of dead Covenant troopers was all that remained.

"Thanks for the help, sir." One of the marines spoke up. The friend-or-foe tag on the radar registered her as Sgt. Ayla Moore. She looked over her shoulder at the clinic. Wounded crewmen and marines were inside, and the medics were having a hard time. She looked back at me. "We could use a hand here, if you can help out. We need to get the wounded off of the ship."

"I don't have the time. But I'll let the Captain know." I told her. A look of disappointment flashed across her face for a split second, but then she nodded.

I thought for a moment, and then left, heading down the long hallway leading to the bridge. Normally, I would've gotten some ammo from those marines. But they needed it more than I did. The bridge was close by, now. I could hear distant gunfire echoing off of the walls, making the entire ship sound like a battlefield. The ammunition reader on my HUD had a blinking number 17, letting me know that the weapon

was nearly out of ammunition. My shields had drained a little from the heat of the plasma repeater rounds that nearly hit me in the chest.

I crossed a hallway, in the center of a firefight between some ODST's and Covenant, keeping my head low and running for the entrance to the bridge. A few random plasma bolts struck me in the side, picking off at my shields. The team of ODST's were pushing the Covenant troops back. I stepped into the bridge, past a guard of three marines. Navy personnel were manning their stations, mashing buttons on their keyboards and calling out strings of information. They were focused. Only one of them even noticed me when I entered. I glanced down at the assault rifle, still marked with the dried blood of the ODST that I'd gotten it from, and slung it onto my back. Walking towards the front of the bridge, I spotted another spartan right away. Nearly as big as Jorge. It was the Master Chief, listening to Captain Keyes. They both glanced in my direction, noticing me approach.

"Noble Six, good to see you. What's your status, son?" Captain Keyes spoke, chewing on a pipe.

"Green, sir." I said, snapping a crisp salute.

"At ease." Keyes said, looking at a holo display of a circular ring. He pointed to it with his pipe. "We've stumbled across this. I don't know what it is, but we're going to have to use it for an escape. We're in no shape to fight the Covenant."

An AI appeared on a pedestal next to Keyes. The avatar was a blue female, with lines of coding running across it. She looked at me.

"Good to see you again, Six." The AI said. I was puzzled. For a moment, the AI didn't ring any bells. But then, I remembered. Carter and Emile were both dead, trying to get me and the AI to the Pillar of Autumn.

"Likewise." I said.

They gave me the rundown of the situation. Most of it, I'd already thought of earlier. I knew that we were within orbit of something, because of what the marine Sargeant had told me. But I had no idea that the ring was what she'd been talking about. Covenant were surrounding us on all sides, firing lasers and torpedoes at the ship. That explained the violent lurch back when I was leaving the cryobay. For a moment, I wondered if the cryobay crewman had managed to get away safely.

"Chief, you need to get Cortana safely off of this ship. Don't let her fall into enemy hands, at any and all costs. If they get a hold of her data, the Covenant will know everything. Weapons research. Force deployment. Black ops insertions." Keyes said, his face set and determined. "Earth"

"I understand." The Master Chief said. On my hud, the number 117 hovered above him.

"Six, I want you to aid the marines. Get as many of them off the ship as possible." He said. Then added, "And make sure that you get back to the cryobay and retrieve 058." Keyes told me. He was referring to

the sniper. I nodded. Then he looked back at me and the Chief.

"You don't have much time. I'm going to try and land this ship itself onto the ring." He was about to turn away, when John spoke up.

"I need a weapon." He said.

"And I need ammo." I said, as well.

"You're going to have to find that as you go. Good luck, spartans." Keyes told us, and then he turned away, facing the viewport.

2. Chapter II

****The Ghost of Noble Six****

****Part Two****

* * *

><p>I was back at the clinic, holding off a wave of Covenant while the marines were getting the wounded to a nearby lifepod. The hallway was wide and open, and a small group of grunts were pressing forward. I fired at them in 3 round bursts, tagging the grunts with a storm of rounds. Blood splattered and marked the walls and floors, the remains of the advancing grunts. A pair of jackals fired back at me, a volley of plasma striking the wall right beside me. A round struck me in the chest, draining the shields down to 77%. They were unable to get off clear shots as I continued the burst fire. Bullets crashed into the shields that the jackals carried, forcing them to fall back. I primed a frag grenade and hurled it at them. It bounced off of the ground and exploded right in front of the jackals. The concussion from the blast sent them flying into the bulkhead, their bones broken, killing them instantly.<p>

I kept my weapon raised and moved forward slowly. It was clear for the moment, but I needed to make sure. The radar was clean, no tags at all. The marines should almost be done with the wounded, but we couldn't afford to let any Covenant get back there.

There was a slip-up on the radar, a slight flash of red, down the hall to the right. I paused for a moment, squeezing the assault rifle slightly harder. I was caught off guard, charged by an enemy. An elite leapt out from the hallway on the right and I managed to fire off 5 rounds before it tackled me. The blow knocked the air out of my lungs and I lost the assault rifle as we crashed into the floor. We rolled on the ground, struggling for control. It felt like I was wrestling a monster from a kids story. The elite was powerful, deadly, like a creature that was built to kill. I hit it in the rib area with my fist three times, but it only made the elite angrier. The beast growled, a scary and haunting sound, and slammed me into the floor. It felt like I'd fallen out of a skyscraper and landed on my back. My energy shields crackled and drained to 42% charged.

It swung at me with it's fist, desperately trying to hammer my head in. I covered up, like a boxer, and my arms took the brunt of the damage. The hits sent a strong vibration from my hands all the way up to my shoulder, and I felt lucky that the armor was taking most of the damage. I brought my knees up to my chest and kicked out as hard

as I could, a direct blow on the elite's center mass. It staggered back, creating the space that I needed, and I stood up, reaching for my sidearm. The elite looked massive, like a brute almost. It's crimson colored armor was like a representation of all the blood that it had spilled over the years. It growled again, a sound filled with rage and hatred.

I rapid-fired the pistol non stop, aiming for the head. It's shields gave away and it's head erupted in a spray of bluish liquid. It collapsed to the floor in a heap, a loud thud as it hit the floor. I was happy to put an end to that senseless growling. The assault rifle was next to the elite, and I walked over and picked it up. My shields slowly recharged, the bar filling up completely, and I was thankful for it. Footsteps approached from behind and I picked up on the yellow FoF tag on my radar. I turned and faced Sgt. Ayla Moore. She glanced past me at the dead Covenant troops before speaking.

"We're done loading the wounded, but we need to find another lifepod." Her crystal green eyes looked into my visor. I ran a quick calculation through my head. Time was running out. I wasn't sure if I had the time to help these marines find a way off the ship, because I still needed to retrieve Linda. The nearest pods were on B level. The rest were already gone. It would take some time to move there.

"Okay. We need to get moving." I could tell that she was relieved. I would've been too. Fighting Covenant meant an entirely different thing to marines, than it did to spartans.

We moved back to the clinic where the rest of her squad was. As we rounded the corner to the clinic, I saw only 4 marines there. There should at least be 10. I imagined that they were scared to death. So many had been lost in such a short time. Even this ship would be gone soon. And the only avenue of escape was a ring. Ayla signaled for the marines to fall in behind her. I noticed that their hands were shaking slightly, something that a normal person wouldn't have picked up on. I raised my hand up, signaling for them to stay behind me.

"Let's go."

* * *

><p>We went up a staircase, getting onto B level, where a few pods remained. On the way, we'd come across a team of ODS'T's. They didn't like the idea of following a spartan, but they didn't have much of a choice. I was there best bet for survival. We went forward, down a wide hallway that had the aftermaths of a battle lingering in it. There was blood, painting the floor in a sea of red and blue and other odd colors. Like a group of kids had gotten together and splattered colors all over the floor. The sight was all too familiar.<p>

We turned down the launch pod hall, my footsteps noticeably sharper than the others. We moved cautiously but quickly. Only one lifepod remained on this level. It sat there by itself, waiting to be used. There wasn't enough space on it for all of the marines to get on. With the team of ODS'T's, plus the squad of marines, one of them would have to be left behind. There wasn't much time. The ship was taking a beating. Plasma torpedoes and lasers were smacking the hull,

shuddering the entire ship.

"Someone has to stay." I told them. I could see the looks on their faces, uncertain, confused, scared. They spoke to each other, trying to decide who would have to stay. None of the ODST's would, that was clear. They barged into the pod immediately. The marines were still coming up with a solution. I didn't have time to wait for an answer.

As I turned to leave them, I felt a hand on my arm. "Wait." It was Sgt. Ayla. "I'll stay with you. You're going to need some help."

I ran a calculation through my mind. She would slow me down. I'd be having to make sure that she doesn't die. I wasn't sure I could keep an eye on her. I needed to move fast to make it to the cryobay. But there weren't any seats left on the pod, and a marine would easily die if they had to stand in one of those things.

A Snag...

"Let's go."

I started at a jogging pace, stepping lightly across the floor. Outside the large window, I could see streaks of plasma criss crossing the blackness of space. The laser strikes almost looked like a lightning show, blazing a brilliant bluish white color. It reminded me of days back when I was in school. The overpopulation because of the number of planets lost to the Covenant forced the school to set up rows of classes in trailers, outside of the main building. I used to love looking out the window when it was storming.

The ship shook as another blast hit it. I nearly lost balance in the violent vibrations. Ayla had to put her hand on the wall to prevent herself from falling. I needed to take the quickest route to the cryobay, which was through the center of B level. Covenant activity would pick up there. A firefight would be inevitable. Covenant casualties would also be inevitable. We moved towards the center of the ship. The belly of the beast. Blood smeared the walls. It looked like something a kid would do if they were given paint and a canvas. The hallway was opening up to B Level's cafeteria. I stuck to the right of the hall and raised my assault rifle. I didn't want to be caught slipping like earlier. That elite almost killed me. Almost.

I pressed my back into the wall and crept to the entrance of the cafeteria. Ayla was behind me. I peeked in for a brief second. An elite spec ops team, four of them in total, were inside. They were clearing space for something. A large, round shaped object was being pulled into the middle of the cafeteria by one of the elites. There were spikes covering the object on all sides. Four spec ops elites, some of their best warriors. This wouldn't be easy. But then again, it never was. I took a mental snap shot of the scene in my mind and dissected it.

I turned to Ayla and snapped off a few quick hand gestures. She grabbed a frag grenade from her utility belt and primed it. I did the same. In my head, I counted down from 5. Inside the cafeteria, there was a sharp scraping sound as the elite dragged the large object across the floor. _4... _There was a low grumble coming from one of the elites. It sounded like a laugh. _3... _I re-ran what I would do on a screen in my head. It was like a movie being played out inside

my mind. A trick I'd learned as a young kid. _2... _The ship rumbled lightly, like a beast being roused from a deep slumber. I didn't count to one. That number didn't matter.

"Go!" I lurched off of the wall and rushed inside the cafeteria. I lobbed the grenade right at the two elites that were furthest away, standing exactly where they'd been on my mental snap shot. Ayla came in behind me and threw a grenade at the elite dragging the spikey object. Rushing to the right side of the room, I fired my assault rifle in a sustained burst at an elite standing alone in the far corner. The energy shield shimmered brightly from the hail of bullets, making the elite appear as if it glowed. They howled in surprise. The grenade I threw bounced off of the floor in between the two elites in back. They both rolled out of the way, but they still took a brunt of damage. The grenade exploded and blasted their shields, the concussion from it spanning through the room in an invisible wave. The other grenade landed beside the elite dragging the spiked object and blew up. It was a bright flash of yellow and white.

The elite I was firing at sprang into motion, moving fast. It fired plasma at me as I strafed to the right. Blue plasma bolts smacked the wall behind me, barely missing my left shoulder. In my peripheral vision, I saw Ayla taking cover behind a table resting on its side. She opened fire on the two elites who'd evaded my grenade. In the center of the room, the elite that had been dragging the spiked thing was laying on the floor, it's legs broken and covered in blood. I rushed forward and charged at the elite that was shooting at me. I wanted to get close to it. The other two elites would see that their comrade was in deep shit. I would be drawing the attention, but the two elites wouldn't be able to fire at me like they'd want to. They would never fire at one of their 'brothers'. It would force them to rush over to engage me at close quarters as well. They didn't want to lose another ally, like the dead one lying in the center of the room. Lives mattered to elites. Especially in a spec ops squad. I knew the feeling. My entire squad had been taken out on Reach. They couldn't do anything about the corpse lying on the floor, but they could prevent me from killing their other comrade.

But they didn't have anything to worry about. I wasn't going to kill the elite. I was going to break it's leg and maim it, tricking the elites into thinking they should stay and protect their disabled ally. By the time they'd make it over their, I would've already fallen back, leaving a little something to remember me by. A frag grenade.

I slid across a table, catching a plasma bolt in my chest. It knocked the breathe out of me and dropped my shields to 80% charged. Firing at the elite, I sprinted across the room, catching another pair of plasma rounds. The elite's shield died, leaving it exposed. Without slowing down, I crashed into it's legs and we fell to the floor. I could hear the sound of its bones splitting from the impact. Music to my ears. We slid across the floor and slammed against the wall. I hauled myself up as fast as I could, reaching for another frag grenade. But before I could catch it, I was hit in the back, hard. I'd underestimated the spec ops elites. One of them slammed me into the wall and pinned me against it, growling in my face. I brought my knee up, with all of my strength behind it, and hit the elite. It's shields collapsed.

I headbutted it this time, throwing as much force into it as I could. The blow snapped the elite's head back, nearly breaking its neck. It yelled in a rage of agony and pain. The elite got stronger somehow, and I felt an icy chill cruise through my spine. Like an ice cube running down my back. It shouted again and slammed me into the wall once more. My energy shields failed, reading 0%. Black dots began to creep into my vision and my eyesight got slightly blurry. Pain raced through my bones. It slammed me again and I felt it throughout my entire body.

A hail of gunfire nailed the elite, blood erupting from it. Ayla was shooting it. Its grip on me loosened and I took advantage of it, breaking free from it. I snatched the plasma pistol attached to the elite's armor and kicked it in the chest. It tripped over a flipped table and collapsed to the ground in a heap, dead. I let out a deep breathe and heard another yell. The last elite. It whipped out an energy sword and charged me, slapping chairs out of the way like toys. I raised the plasma pistol and fired several rounds at it. They splashed into its armor but didn't break the energy shield. The elite was trucking through the cafeteria like a brute gone berserk. I fired at it again, finally disabling its energy shield. The elite didn't slow down and cleared the distance between us.

I rolled out of the way, barely dodging the energy blade. It slashed the wall where I'd been standing a split second earlier, leaving a deep gash in the hull. I got back to my feet, just in time to catch a kick in my chest. The elite was fast as hell. It knocked me against the wall, like before. My chest felt like it'd been hammered over and over. It was about to slice me in half. I looked up to see the elite swinging the energy sword in a vicious arc. Right before it hit me, the elite got slammed by a wave of gunfire from Ayla. It staggered backwards, grabbing its side where it'd been shot. A flurry of bullets hit it in the head, sending it straight to the floor. I watched, breathing heavily, as it twitched. The last remnants of life escaped from its body.

I leaned against the wall, shaking with adrenaline and fear. My body felt like it'd been tossed around carelessly. My lungs burned every time I took a breathe and my legs felt a bit wobbly. I blinked rapidly to clear my vision. A set of marks and scars littered my newest set of armor. That had been too close. I would've been dead, no doubt. Elites weren't like other Covenant troops. They couldn't be predicted. And the more you hurt them, the angrier they got. The angrier they got, the more dangerous they were. I wondered if the Master Chief was having a difficult time like me. I shook my head slightly, regaining my focus. I had a job to do.

"They nearly got you there." I heard Ayla say. She was right. She saved me twice.

"Nearly isn't good enough."

I stood back up and holstered the plasma pistol. I had to admit it, Ayla was brave. There was no way in hell I would barge into a room with four elites, if I were a marine regular. Planet Reach and that time spent inside the cryo tube had dulled my effectiveness. I hadn't thought we'd be caught up in a situation like this so soon after we'd left Reach. I wanted to get some rest. I was the last man standing from Noble team. John and I were probably the only Spartans left standing in total. I'd let these thoughts cloud my head. That was a

fatal mistake that nearly got me killed. It wouldn't happen again. I looked back at Ayla. She couldn't see my face, but it seemed like she could. Her eyes seemed as if they were looking through my visor.

"Let's go." I told her.

Not much further to go before we reached the cryo bay. And then the home stretch. But that wasn't guaranteed. We had no idea what that ring was. It could be worse down there than it was up here. I would have to regroup with the Master Chief on the surface and look for survivors.

3. Chapter III

****The Ghost of The Noble Six****

****Chapter III****

* * *

><p>Training to become a Spartan III had been far from simple. It was the most grueling experience of my life, and still is. I had to do that training at a very young age. It depended on how well you could adapt and survive. That was the entire length of training. Adapting and surviving. Those who couldn't were left behind, some of them even died. I had almost gotten left behind as well. But I didn't. I willed myself to push on. Everlasting runs, endless sit ups, sleep deprivation, I had endured all of it. They moved me out of my class, and I never saw any of those who had endured it with me again. Except for Kat. From my perspective, it seemed as if all that training hadn't prepared us enough for what was going on now. About 300 of us in total had been in Beta Company. As far as I know, I'm the last man standing from that 300. I haven't seen any other spartan from that group, other than Kat. Training only goes so far. It's personal instinct that takes you further. That's what I'd relied on to get me through that training. It's what I'm relying on now. The spiked thing that the elites had been guarding was some type of bomb. It would have detonated if we hadn't come across it. I didn't know if it was pure luck or just simple chance that we'd found it. Either way, it wasn't a threat anymore. Those elites weren't either.<p>

We turned down a narrow hallway leading to the cryobay and I picked up a small collection of FOE tags on my radar. A team of grunts were trying to get into it. They spotted us and started shrieking in their foreign language. A barrage of plasma fire rocketed down the hall and I ducked. Plasma marks scored the walls and the floor. I aimed and fired my assault rifle, hugging the left side of the hallway. Ayla clung to the right side, making herself a small target. Blood erupted from the grunts and plasma shots went wild. My ammo counter was draining fast, and the grunts were dropping fast. The last grunt was aiming a charged plasma pistol shot, and I fired at it. Bullets slammed into it's chest, spewing sickly colored blood and killing it, but it fired the plasma round.

I watched as the fat blob of plasma streaked down the hall. It crashed into Ayla, a center mass shot. She collapsed to the floor, unmoving. A large plasma burn marked her chest. I rushed over and lifted her from the floor, cradling her in my hands. Dark blood

leaked from her mouth. She looked at me, fear in her eyes.

"I don't want to die..." I faintly heard from her lips. A quick slash of pain tripped my chest. I watched as the life slowly left her eyes, and her body became limp. There was nothing I could do. I lowered her to the floor gently, and took her dog tags. Another pair of dog tags. The UNSC had lost another hero.

Too many dead heroes and counting.

The ship shook lightly, urging me on. I stood up and left her without looking back. Up ahead, the door to the cryobay had been weakened considerably by the grunts. Black burn spots inked the entrance. I kicked the door as hard as I could and it snapped out, flying into the cryo room. It slid across the floor with a loud shriek before finally coming to a halt. Inside, the room looked different. It was like walking through a graveyard. All of the cryotubes had been shut down to preserve power, killing it's inhabitants, except for the one with Linda. I slid the assault rifle onto my back and walked through the room, looking into the cryotubes. So many UNSC personnel, wasted. There hadn't been enough time to thaw out everybody. I felt a chill splinter its way through my body, like an ice cube sliding down my back. This could have been my fate. This was war. And war is hell.

I reached Linda's tube. The 'window' of it was frosted slightly. A Spartan II clad in MJOLNIR armor lay inside of it, still and quiet. The nameplate on the armor read Linda-058. The status bar on the side of the tube was white. She was in bad shape, definitely. I touched the cryotube with my hand. So much time spent inside of those things. That was the only life I knew. Warfare and sleeping in cryotubes. Linda was the same as me. This war had a heavy price on it, and humanity has been paying it since it first started. I was a part of the equation. Just a small cog in a much larger machine that was starting to lose power. That's what I am. A small piece, fitting snugly into place, being packed in tight with all the others. This spartan inside the cryotube was one as well. I needed to figure out how to get off the ship.

Taking my hand off of the cryotube, I tapped a series of buttons on the keypad next to it. The pod crackled and hissed, opening up slowly. Cool air rushed out of it and mixed in the air of the bay. With the frosted window out of the way, I could clearly see the spartan inside of it. Her armor was cracked and marked with heavy plasma rounds. The result of years of combat. I could see my reflection in the visor of the helmet. An average height spartan stood staring back at me, my reflection. It had been a while since I last saw myself in full gear, and for the first time in my life, it felt as though this look was what I was meant to look like. A soldier fully clad in armor. So much time spent inside of it.

Gathering up all of my strength, I reached inside and lifted Linda. I put my foot on the cryotube and used it to help me pull her out of the pod. I picked up the heavy spartan and took a step back from the cryotube. This was the first time I'd held another spartan since the day Kat was killed. Cradling Linda in my arms, I walked across the cryo bay and stepped back out into the hall. It was like emerging from a dark void and stepping into a safe haven. My radar hadn't picked up anything, and I figured that most of the action had passed over this area of the ship a while ago, save for the team of grunts who'd been trying to get inside the cryobay. I walked back down the

hall the way I came, my foot steps like loud claps from being overencumbered. I swallowed hard as I stepped past Ayla. Her lifeless body lay in the same position as I'd left it. Continuing onward, I trudged my way to the nearest lifepod.

The scene reminded me of a memory from my childhood. Every so often, I would remember random things from the past. This thing was something that happened back when I was still an elementary student. I remember having to walk home from school in the heavy rain with my sister. Mom was at work and didn't have anybody to come pick us up. I have a hard time remembering my sister, but I do remember that she was younger than me and looked like mom. On that day, my sister had sprang her ankle badly and couldn't walk. With no other option, I'd been forced to carry her in the same fashion as I was currently carrying Linda. It's hard to remember, but I recall not being annoyed at having to carry her. She was my younger sister and I'd quickly suggested lifting her to the house. That was how I spent a lot of my childhood, with my small family and not many friends. Then, one day, my sister was going to visit our grandparents out of town, and I wasn't able to go because of trouble at school. I'd gotten into a fight. My sister rode off with our grandparents, heading away from our house. That was the last time I ever saw her. A day after they left, the planet got attacked by Covenant, and I was shipped offworld by myself in the nick of time. I haven't seen anyone from my family since, and I have no idea if any of them are alive.

There was a slip up on my radar and I stopped instantly, naturally moving off to the side of the hallway. It was coming from up ahead. A large group of 7 red dots moved slowly across my radar. They would pass by in front of us. I slipped into a small storage room on the side of the hallway, cringing at the sound of the doors sliding open. They might have heard that. The red dots were getting closer, nearly on the same hall as us. I slowly bent down on one knee and rested Linda onto the floor. Then I peeked out of the room, just barely, and rested my hand on my sidearm. I watched closely as a mixed team of elites and jackals walked past. They looked deadly, hefting vicious plasma weapons at the ready. My heartbeat tapped a little faster. If they came down the hall in our direction, we would be spotted. I immediately ran a calculation through my mind of what I'd do if that happened. They were moving slowly and cautiously, but they didn't come down the hall. They continued forward. The jackals were making loud chittering noises, sounding like a creature that was bent on killing. But they wouldn't be killing me.

The squad went out of sight, and I waited until all of the enemy tags disappeared off of my radar. I reached over and gathered my strength again to pick Linda up. Her arm hung loosely. Stepping back out into the hall, I pressed forward. I took a quick peek around the corner to see if the covenant squad was out of range, and they were. _Good._ My arms began to give off the faintest signs of fatigue at carrying the spartan, but I ignored it. The ship jumped rigorously and I nearly fell with Linda. I'd barely managed to catch my balance. Every single bang was the reminder that time was winding down. Keyes would be going head first into the ring very soon. Either that, or the ship would be destroyed completely. Neither was a good thing. And Linda and I were still on board.

I rounded another corner and felt a huge wave of relief. A single lifepod sat dormant in the long hall. Every single one of them were gone except for that lone one. It rested peacefully in its spot. I

double checked my radar and looked around in all directions before I stepped onto it. The home stretch was the most dangerous part of any mission. Countless lives had been lost in that final effort. Jorge. Emile. Kat. All of them had died being so close to the main goal.

But I knew that this was a job done successfully. _Not 100%, _I thought as my mind went back to the marine. It wasn't good, but I couldn't help the sense that I'd made a big mistake in allowing Ayla to die. If I'd been stronger, nobody would have lost their life. It was a job done, but not done good enough. I shut the doors to the lifepod and carefully placed Linda into one of the seats, and secured her in tightly. Being a pilot, I knew the control layout of the lifepod. I hopped into the pilot's seat and got to work, starting up the lifepod. Controls were green. Engine power was at 97%. Good. I slowly turned the thrust of the ship up to maximum degree, counted to three, and disengaged the lifepod from the ship. It jerked forward hard and shot out into black space, gaining speed at a fast rate. I sat there and tapped a few more buttons and swiveled around in the seat for a moment.

Looking back at the _Pillar of Autumn, _I could see the damage that it'd sustained. All of those bumps that I'd felt were plasma torpedoes and other weapons hitting it. Parts of the ship were blown out and it looked sickly. Like a ghost ship. Somewhere up there was Captain Keyes. The ship was filled with casualties from both Covenant and UNSC. It was like a floating graveyard. I turned back towards the control panel and switched on the auto pilot mode and turned back around. Looking around, I found a pair of medkits bolted to the hull of the lifepod. I needed to see if there was any way I could help Linda. Taking one last look at the ship, I felt a bone chilling coolness sweep through me. Less than a few hours ago, I'd been asleep on it. Now it was a hulk of destroyed metal floating through space. That was the last time that I would ever step foot on that ship.

Glancing out the main viewport, I looked down at my next battlefield. A hard crash landing and a new world awaited me. There was no escape from the threat of death. I shook my head and turned back towards Linda. There wasn't much I could do with the limited items of the medkit. So I decided to take the time to think and wait. Waiting for the next rough road that was inevitable to come. I couldn't stand it.

4. Chapter IV

Note: I would've gotten this chapter out sooner, but my sister uses the computer as well.

I'm going to put the Chapter 5 out shortly after this one, because I want to split this scene into two chapters, instead of having a big fat one.

Thank you for reading.

****The Ghost of Noble Six****

****Chapter IV****

Raise the rebel from his grave.

* * *

><p>They say that all plans go to hell when the first shot is fired. It's an old saying that I've known about for a long time. It originated centuries ago, and still floats around to this day. Humanity has been waging war over its entire history. Countless operations have proved this quote to be highly accurate. There was a planned mission to take out a Covenant Supercarrier during the Fall of Reach. If I'd known better at the time, and operated properly, then Jorge wouldn't have died on that ship. That plan turned into turmoil when we first landed on the Covenant frigate. At the time, I couldn't explain it, but I could feel the danger that we were stepping in. I knew something bad was about to happen, and it had scared the hell out of me, but I didn't know what it was. I remember that moment clearly, stepping out of the Sabre and planting my feet on the hull of the ship. It felt like I was walking into a crypt of dead. We lost our ship as well on that mission. We lost a bunch of marines onboard that ship. And we lost one of the legendary Spartan II's. Only to have an even larger Covenant fleet jump in system shortly after.<p>

War is hell.

Right now, my entire body felt as if it'd been sent to hell, toured the entire place, and sent back. The crash landing was anything but smooth. My bones felt wobbly and my chest burned. There was a low _whoooooo_ sound as my shields slowly recharged. Locking my armor had prevented a lot of damage, but I still felt the effects. Outside the pod, I could see a clear blue sky above, occasionally tacked with clouds. Large trees loomed above, towering over the ground below, casting a cool shade over everything beneath. Bushes and shrubs stood firmly next to the larger trees. A soft whisper of wind rustled the vegetation, making everything shiver. The place looked peaceful. It looked like my homeworld. For a brief moment, I lay there, watching the quiet bliss of this unknown ring.

Then, I shook my head slightly and unhooked myself from the pilot seat. I stretched as I stood up and equipped my assault rifle. An unknown world could hold unknown hostiles. So I walked out of the pod and did a quick scan. A large structure was the first thing that I saw. It was very close to the pod, and I wondered how close we'd come to hitting it. I hadn't even noticed it when we were falling. It was gigantic, standing at least a kilometer high. The structure looked smooth and shiny, and I immediately registered it as not being natural. It was too straight, too precise, too rigid. A long ramp on the side that I could see led up to a large balcony that ran around the object completely. This was some kind of station. The balcony covered everything in a 360 degree radius, surrounding the unusual building. The structure itself was triangular in shape, and looked... _odd. _

There were marines on it, setting up a network of defenses. Survivors from the _Pillar of Autumn _had already started to dig in here. At least twenty of them. Tree trunks were stacked into place surrounding the structure on the ground to set up a perimeter. It wasn't much, just a rag tag set up, but it was better than nothing. Three of the marines were heading my way, their boots crunching in the crisp grass. They were coming to check out the crash. The FOF tags on my

radar read out PVT. Larry Jasper, SGT. Marcon Bowing, and PVT. Anna Baker. A trio of troops with a look of hope in their eyes. No doubt they were glad to see some back up. I could relate to them. Every warrior went through the feel of being outnumbered. It was inevitable in the Human-Covenant war.

"Man, it's good to see you." A mahogany colored marine spoke up as they approached. The insignia on his armor signalled that he was the Sergeant. He was young, but his eyes expressed a lot of experience. I figured that he'd been in a situation like this before. He looked past my shoulder, back at the pod. "You the only one?"

"Negative. Give me a sitrep." I told him as I turned back to the escape pod. I still needed to get Linda out of it. I slipped my assault rifle onto my back and went to pick her up. He started to talk as I did so.

"We're all that's left of 2nd platoon, Charlie company. 28 of us in total. Five wounded. We hit down here a little while ago and got into a heavy engagement with Covenant ground troops." He told me as all three of them watched as I lifted Linda out of the pod. They clearly weren't used to seeing fully armored spartans in bad shape. I wasn't either. The only spartan that I'd actually saw die up close was Kat. She died right next to me and it'd frightened me. That was the first time I've ever held a lifeless spartan, and that's what made her death so much more drastic than the others.

"We lost a lot of people in that fight, too." Private Anna said. I could hear the fear in her voice as she said that. They'd witnessed a lot of tragedy in the past hour. They probably felt that they couldn't escape the fight no matter what happened. From one battlezone to the next. Thick locks of dirty blonde hair hung down over her face. I guessed her age at maybe 19. Young people fighting a war that has been raging since before they were even born.

"Yeah." Marcon said, clearly agreeing with her. The other marine, Larry, kept quiet. "We've been trying to get some type of defense set up. The Covenant haven't come back, but we know it's only a matter of time." Marcon's words hung in the air. They went silent when he said that. It was obvious that they were afraid. I walked past them, carrying Linda. There was nothing in the pod that was worth scavenging, so the marines trailed close behind me. Large tree trunks lined the ground around the large construct. All eyes were on us as we made our way to them. Marines sat huddled down behind the logs, waiting. Waiting for an attack to come. Nobody spoke as I marched by them and headed up the ramp to the upper balcony.

It felt as if I was stepping on solid water. The material that this thing was built out of felt extremely smooth. It was solid, but felt soft. I couldn't hear my footsteps as I walked. I stepped onto the upper balcony and took a quick look around. More marines were nestled up here, taking cover behind walls that lined the edge of the balcony. Battle rifles were aimed down below to spot any Covenant, but the eyes were all on me. There was a small huddle off to the far side with wounded laying around. A pair of medics tended to them, rushing to ease their pain. I walked to them and gently placed Linda on the floor. It was a crude arrangement, but it was the best I could do. There were no medical tents out here. Just a collection of wounded ushered off to the side.

I backed away from them and turned around to face Marcon.

"It's not much, but we're doing the best we can here. Most of our medics got killed in the earlier firefight."

"Who's in charge here?"

His face changed slightly, and so did Anna's and Larry's. "I am. Our _el-tee _got hit as soon as we dropped in." They looked at me. I could tell that they'd been close to their lieutenant. "There's nothing left of him. A fuel rod cannon round caught him dead center."

"I can't believe he's gone." Anna said quietly. A spray of freckles covered her face, adding more detail to her young features. Larry still didn't speak.

I took another look around. The line of sight was much better on top of the balcony, and I could make better sense of the place. It looked like we were in a hilly area. Miniature mountains rose up in the distance, each one straining to see past the other. Green was everywhere. Trees covered the place. Far off, I could see a lake resting peacefully. Everything looked like a vacation resort. _What is this place? _It was a beautiful landscape, like a painting. The sky was tagged with an occasional cloud. I could see across the entire ring if I looked directly up. A thin stretch of some type of metal, barely visible, stretched from left to right. The thin stretch got bigger and bigger as I followed it with my eye, until I was looking directly to my right at the side of the ring. It was hard to believe that we were sitting on a round circle.

"What about communications?" I asked, turning to Marcon. He looked over his shoulder and frowned as if he was trying to see something that wasn't there.

"Our radio guy is trying, but uh... I think that's a no go." He said. I ran a calculation through my head.

The Chief would have to come to us. There wasn't enough marines for us to move effectively. From what I've seen so far, the Covenant down here mean business. We wouldn't stand a chance if we tried to move. Plus, we had wounded, including a spartan. That would slow us down and hinder us even further. Even still, I didn't know where to go. This place looked familiar, but I've never been here before, definitely. It all looked man made. If we attempted to get to some place safer, like high ground, I doubted that we would make it there. We would have to be lucky to get there without getting contact with Covenant. Even if, chances were good that the Covenant already had the high ground. We would end up being the ones on the attack. The result would be a slaughter. Marcon, Anna, and Larry wouldn't last a minute. They would die in a blaze of plasma. Jackal snipers would be taking heads off. I came to the conclusion that we needed to stay put for the time being. It was our best bet.

"All right. Make sure everyone is prepped and ready. We don't need to be caught with our pants down." I told Marcon. He nodded slightly. I pointed to a spot on the front side of the balcony. "Get a machine gun right there. That'll give 'em the best line of sight and give us the best advantage. It can cover everything in a wide degree." I told him. He sent Anna off to do the errand work. "Who's your best

shot?"

"Larry." He said quickly, nodding towards the short marine standing next to him. Larry was stocky and had a burn mark on the side of his face. A grim and determined look was settled on him. To me, he looked more like an ODST than a marine regular. Probably went out for the training and dropped out of it. That was how it worked most of the time. You don't usually find people who legitimately want to become an ODST. You find people who go out for ODST school to see how long they last. It's designed to make you fail. Looking at Larry, I figured that he was one of the many drop outs. "He's the best shot in the comp'nee."

"Give him a sniper rifle with as much ammo as you can find. Jasper, you need to post up on the back side of this thing." I said, referring to the structure we were standing on. A large bare hill was at the back, putting a stop to anything coming from that direction. Covenant troops wouldn't lumber down a hill that size. Even still, there was little to no cover. If they foolishly came down that way, it would be open season for us. "Looking at the terrain, I can just about say for certain that they won't come from that way. Too open. Too risky. You'll have the best protection and sight if you go to that end. Your back will basically be against a wall, and you'll be able to cover everything. Go back there. Do it." I told him. He nodded without speaking, and left with Marcon to go and grab the sniper. I would be on the ground, in the heat of the battle, where I belonged. I know that my aim is better than anyone else here, by an extremely large margin, but I'm the only able spartan here. It's not my position to be sitting back where it's safe, picking off targets like I was bird hunting. I could snipe, but that isn't what I like to do. My element is the center of the battlefield. Jun used to love sniping, and claimed he was the best. Rumor had it that Linda made him look like a regular rifleman.

I stepped over to the edge of the balcony and leaned over the protective wall, standing next to a marine. Most of the terrain was woodland. Large trees stood proud in the mist of green. Bushes sat down next to them, swaying lightly with the breeze. There weren't any animals that I could see, but it looked as if there should be some. The place looked like a campground. The marines had a loose perimeter stretching around the 'base'. They were dug in behind huge tree trunks that lay flat on the ground. I counted 13 on the ground. That left about 10 able marines posted up on the balcony where I was. The rest of them, five to be exact, were wounded. The numbers didn't look good. But I wasn't interested in numbers. I was interested in Covenant tactics. I ran a calculation through my head.

I figured that they wouldn't send a lot of elites. As far as the Covenant knew, I wasn't here. In their perspective, the only thing here is a rag tag group of marines. No real sweat for them. They wouldn't throw a bunch of elites at us because they would deem it a waste of resource. This was a fight that was beneath the elite's paygrade. At worst, they would send a few minors. The rest of the assault would be mainly grunts, with some jackal support. That was both a good thing and a bad thing. The good part about it was that we wouldn't have to contend with hunters and brutes. We didn't have the firepower to take on hunters. Brutes were too powerful and mean, and would easily rip through the thin line of marines. The bad part about this ordeal was that we would be facing grunts. The little squat suckers might be small and punkish, but that didn't mean that they

were ineffective. The stories about battles against hundreds of grunts were true. Every time the Covenant sent them in an assault, they always guaranteed that the UNSC forces would be outnumbered. We were looking at 75+ grunts, easily. Tack on about 20 jackals with that, and you've got a serious attack on your hands. I don't care what the size of the UNSC force is, they always sent in a wealthy number of grunts.

I could see the marine standing next to me in my peripheral vision. I looked at her.

"We're gonna be alright with you here." She said. Her black hair matched the color of her eyes. I could tell that she was nervous. Combat jitters was very common. Especially when you're outnumbered and outgunned. But I could also tell that she was definitely glad to see me. It was obvious.

I didn't say anything.

"I can't believe this place. I don't know how we ended up here." She told me, looking out at the forest in the distance. "From Reach to this place. What do you think?" She asked. I thought about what she said. We hadn't been gone from Reach hardly any time before the Covenant caught up with us. It was a brief period of 'peace', before we were back into the fray with Covenant again. This time, I have to fight along side traditional UNSC forces. It's a big change of pace from the usual spec ops. I usually don't speak to regular UNSC troops often. Most of the time, I'm alone, except for my brief membership of Noble team. I could see why this marine felt relieved to have me here. Would I still be alive if I wasn't a spartan? To them, I was a legend. I didn't feel like one. But I stopped thinking and feeling, and decided to answer her question.

"I have a feeling that we're not supposed to be here, on this ring. This place isn't supposed to have a war raging on it. Covenant didn't build this thing." I said. "We could be walking on a hidden weapon, for all we know." I told her. Her nameplate said Jennson Carlisle. Another name in a sea of them serving the UNSC. A name that had a story behind it, like all the others.

"A hidden weapon." She repeated. Her voice sounded light, like the sound of the ocean at nighttime. I looked over my shoulder and saw the machine gunner setting up on the front of the balcony. He was loaded down with as much ammunition as possible. The machine gun was a heavy one, like the one that Jorge carried around. Except his was an even heavier model. Those things felt worse than being rammed by an elephant. They could tear a warthog apart. Death was certain, wherever this thing was. They made the older models, 50 rounds per second models, look like pea shooters.

I looked forward again, facing the distant forest, and took my helmet off for a moment. I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken it off. The constant breeze of wind caught my dark black hair and shuffled it slightly. It was cool and felt amazing. The air smelled clean and refreshing. This place was incredible. It was like a perfect artificial world. I slipped my helmet back on and secured it.

"Well, if Covenant didn't build this, then I wonder who did. They might be more peaceful than Covenant, don't you think?" Jennson asked me. She was right. The thought of another collection of aliens out

there somewhere was unpleasant, but I couldn't imagine the creators of this ring being a violent species. The place had a natural feel to it that I didn't understand. It felt... Comfortable.

Before I could reply, the hum of engines in the distance caught my attention. A strong, powerful sound that carried weight. It was getting louder by the second. I looked into the distance and made out a trio of black dots flying past a hill. I had reason to believe that they weren't UNSC ships. Couldn't be. The pelicans had gone down to the surface early, transporting crewmen and wounded. There had been a lot of those two. They didn't have time to organize a squadron of three pelicans to search for survivors. Even if they mounted a search, they wouldn't send three pelicans in a group. Pilots were trained to spread out. You don't send several pelicans to search one area. You only needed one to scan a certain zone. Another thing was that all three of them were headed straight towards us, in a perfect formation. That doesn't happen in a search. What are the chances of the searchers to head directly towards your position? It's not like we popped flares. The UNSC didn't know where we were. Our radio is out, so I know that the marines couldn't have gotten contact with anyone. I haven't picked up anything on my comlink yet, either. That brought me to the conclusion that a Covenant force was about to hit us head first. Below, on the ground, a marine yelled out.

"Covenant! We got company, look alive!" The marine shouted. People were running to their positions, getting set up and prepared. The machine gunner guy was locking and loading, and had a hard set look on his face. I figured that he was ready to die, if it came to that. Jennson picked up her BR55 from the floor next to her aimed at the enemy formation. I magnified the zoom in my HUD 10x to get a better look. Three phantom drop ships with door gunners on either side of all of them. Those would have to go down, quick. Their plasma cannons could wipe out any cover. I couldn't see on the inside of them, but I assumed that they were packed. When in doubt, expect the worst. That was something that we'd been taught way back in training.

I resetted the magnification of my HUD and pulled out my assault rifle. I needed to get down to the ground. From where I stood on the balcony, I could see Anna rushing to take cover behind a large boulder sticking out of the ground. Marcon was dug in next to a pair of other marines, slapping a fresh clip into his MA5B. I hoped that the sniper was in his right spot. He would be a key factor in this battle. Marcon seemed like a strong guy. He would also be an important factor. I could tell by the way he carried his self that he was seasoned. This was going to be a nasty fight. The drop ships were getting closer, moving at top speed. I jogged to the ramp that connected the balcony to the ground and ran down it. The familiar sense of adrenaline swooped into me all at once. It was a consuming feel, like I was trapped inside a mist of it. We have to take this war one flight of stairs at a time. Each battle was a single step. This step was going to be fairly higher than the others.

5. Chapter V

****The Ghost of Noble Six.****

****Chapter V.****

It's progress, until there's nothing left to gain.

* * *

><p>Mom had always said that the key to making the right decisions was to use both my mind and my heart. This is a message that is fairly clear in my memory of her. It's hard to recall those things of my civilian life. I don't remember what going out and buying groceries meant. I don't even remember what it means to have a family. The only thing I know is military. But that saying has stuck with me through all these years. At the time, I didn't understand what she meant by it. It slowly unraveled its mystery to me as I worked my way through boot camp. That was a message that she lived by. If only I'd been faster and stronger, she would still be alive. I hadn't been quick enough. The nightmares still haunt me as I remember my younger self shaking with fear, not being able to operate efficiently. It'd cost us some valuable time. Crying had taken away my coherent thoughts. It eventually let to my mother having to make a decision. And the price was her life.<p>

If only I could go back in time to change things. I could redo some of my foolish decisions.

But right now, I was making a life or death choice.

A large plasma blob soared through the air, heading straight toward me. It flew above the head of a marine that was crouching behind a boulder. I rolled out of the way in time, and it melted into an even larger rock that was behind me, sizzling away at it for a few seconds. It was a close call, but not close enough. I fired at the grunt who'd shot it, killing him with a barrage of hot lead. Behind that grunt was another trio of them, and I sent a wave of rounds at them. They were peppered with the bullets, spewing their sickly colored blood and collapsing to the ground. Above, I could see the door gunner of a phantom taking aim at me. I'd picked up some attention. The superheated plasma plunged towards my direction. My shields took a few hits. I sprinted with my head down as the plasma tried to catch up with me. The sound of battle rifle fire pierced the battlefield, and I took a quick glance up to see the door gunner falling towards the ground. A three round burst, center mass. The grunt was dead before it hit the ground.

I took cover behind an upright tree and reloaded. The firefight was a leveled field. Covenant on one side and UNSC on the other. Teams of grunts and jackals were steadily gaining ground on us. Most of the field was wooded, except for the fairly open ground surrounding the immediate space of the alien structure. We had a loose perimeter set up, but it wouldn't hold for long. The machine gunner would have to get greedy once we were pushed back far enough. Looking past the crossfire, I could see Marcon with a group of marines, shouting out orders and directing fire. He had a leveled head in an intense battle like this one. The guy would've made a decent spartan. In the center of the crossfire, I could see a marine get riddled with plasma fire.

I couldn't hear his scream.

The sniper rifle went off, taking out a target that I couldn't see. I went out from behind the cover of the tree. A pair of jackals were pressing forward and I fired at them in 5 round bursts. Their shields withstood the fire, though. Plasma bolts slammed into the trees

around me, chipping off pieces of wood. I strafed to the right, moving past a fat tree and back into their line of sight. A plasma bolt struck me in the chest, dead center, and it felt as if I'd been punched by a brute. It caused me to stagger backwards a little, and my shields fell to 38%. I shook the blow off and aimed at their legs. They tripped up and fell, exposing their defenseless bodies. Deadly mistake. They collapsed under my hail of gunfire, screeching in pain and shock. Bullets filled their corpses.

Again, the sniper rifle sounded off, killing an unlucky Covenant trooper. Larry was on point. Rounds from the machine gunner began to pour in, suppressing the Covenant. Another pair of marines were destroyed by a fuel rod cannon round. The magnificent blaze of plasma was blinding, and my visor instantly polarized. It was over in a flash, and the ground trembled with after effects from the explosion. Looking to my right, I saw the grunt carrying the fuel rod cannon. It aimed at the machine gunner. Just before it fired, a sniper round caught it in the head. The round tore completely through the grunt and it died immediately.

I took cover behind a tree, primed a frag grenade, and tossed it into the grunt ranks. It bounced off of a tree and rolled into the center of a group of them. They scattered like ants, desperately trying to get away. It blew up, the sound of a violent explosion mixed with alien screams. Across the field, Marcon was pushed back against the structure. I could tell that he'd taken some casualties, but not how many. The perimeter was broken. Marines were struggling to find a place to take cover as heaping waves of plasma rushed at them. The Covenant were steadily gaining ground. An elite minor was approaching, barking off orders to his grunts. I aimed and fired at him. Bullets clapped into his energy shields and his attention snapped to me. It growled when it spotted me. I kept up the barrage, hammering it with 7.62mm. The elite dodged out of the way, rolling off to the side, and I tracked it's movements.

It stood up and fired a plasma repeater at me. I ducked behind the tree as hot plasma struck into it. Pieces of wood showered around me. My radar tracked it as it moved off to the side, trying to draw a bead on me. The machine gunner opened fire, aiming at the elite minor. I leaned around cover and saw the elite get slammed with lead. It crumpled to the ground in a heap, covered with blood. It raised it's weapon and fired off a pair of bolts before dying off. Their commander was down now. The grunts were in disarray, some of them running, and some of them freelancing. It was a good thing for us. Looking past the elite, I could see a squad of jackals pressing a group of marines. The marines were returning fire, but it bounced harmlessly off of their wrist shields. A fat blob of plasma erupted from one of the jackals and struck a marine in the arm, burning it off completely. The marine fell to his knees, screaming. I aimed and fired at the jackals, hitting them from the side. Sniper rounds crashed into their shields from the other direction, suppressing them completely. My ammo counter hit zero and I reloaded.

Their phantom support was gone now, having withdrawn from the battlefield. Grunts and jackals were the only things left. The battle was nearing its end. A trio of plasma rounds struck me on my side, hammering my shields and throwing me off balance. Stumbling, I immediately turned to my right, aiming frantically, but didn't see anything. For a brief instant, I was confused. There were no Covenant troops that I could see, and there wasn't any movement on my radar.

But then I caught a shimmer of dirt and air, a slight movement, and realized that an elite spec ops trooper was using active camouflauge. I dived to the right, just in time to avoid a deadly round from a plasma rifle. It moved fast, getting in hand-to-hand range of me, and as I stood up, it knocked the assault rifle from my hand with a hard swipe. I threw a punch but hit nothing but air, and caught a blow to my ribs, knocking the breath out of me.

I shook my head to clear my vision and focused. There was a shift in the air as the invisible elite moved, and I ducked down quick. The blow brushed off of me, draining my shields by a small margin, and I used my momentum to roll out of arm's reach. There wasn't time to waste. As I stood back up, my radar picked up the movement of the elite as it strafed to the side. There was a sharp hiss and crackle as an energy sword materialized out of thin air, and the elite's invisibility went away all together. It's armor was dark black, with a violent cut running across it's chest armor plating. Another scar marked the side of the elite's 'face', and I immediately realized that I was dealing with a veteran. In all of my experience, I've only dealt with energy swords a few times. The station back on Reach, my first mission with Noble team, was one of those times. I knew that they weren't to be trifled with.

I reached for my pistol, whipped it up, and fired it. The thing was like a hand cannon almost, kicking violently in my hands. Fat slugs slammed into the elite, and it growled. It sounded like a strain of pure evil. It's shields failed miserably, and the elite dashed forward, right into my face. I reacted just in time, leaning back to avoid the deadly swipe of the blade as it sliced the air right where my neck had just been. Heat from the sword cut off my already drained shields. The elite lunged forward for a straight stab, and I side stepped it, grabbed its arm as hard as I could, and twisted. At the same time, I brought my knee up and landed a blow to its chest. The elite howled in pain and head butted me, causing me to release my grip and stumble backwards. Black dots marked my vision and I couldn't see straight. My head felt like it'd been shaken violently for hours.

The elite put a hand over it's chest, looking down at the blood spilling from the bullet wounds. It looked at me and spread its 'mouth', releasing a low growl, and charged off in the opposite direction. The elite raced through trees, flashing back into a state of partial invisibility, and left the battlefield. Bushes and shrubs shimmied aside as it violently knocked them out of the way. I shook my head to clear my vision. Luck had just saved me. If that elite hadn't run off, I would've been dead, no doubt. My ribs felt cracked, but I knew they weren't. My neck felt blistered from the proximity of the energy sword. And my head hurt like hell. I didn't have the luxury of taking a rest when I'm hurting. The battle was still going on. I ran over to my assault rifle, picked it up, and turned my attention towards the fight.

The grunts were 'routing', and so were the jackals. Both sides were worn down, considerably. The remaining marines started to cheer as the Covenant forces withdrew from the battlefield. Bushes swayed as fleeing grunts sprinted through them. It was over, for the time being. Everything was tagged with plasma burns, marking the whole field with dirty black spots. I was running low on ammo, and I'm sure that the marines are as well. Trees were blown down from the force of explosions and branches were thrown about everywhere. I headed

towards the structure where the rest of the marines were, stepping over dead jackals and grunts. Sickly colored blood spilled over the ground. My shields recharged slowly and gloomly.

The marines looked battered and broken. Their spirit was dwindling. Blank faces stared back at me as I walked amongst them, wondering what the next move would be. I could feel the sense of fear in them, and it felt all too familiar. Marcon was sitting on the ground, resting his back on the structure itself, catching his breath. An empty MA5B lay on the ground next to him, but his sidearm was in his hand. I crouched down next to him.

"What's our count?" I asked him, looking around at the marines as they regrouped. From the corner of my eye, I could see him shaking his head slowly.

"Down to 12 of us able to fight."

"Regroup everybody, check ammunition, and scavenge for supplies. We have to survive here. You need to get anything you can from the dead." He looked up at me, his eyes showing a hint of dread.

"Aye, sir."

I saw Anna leaning against a large bolder that was sticking out of the ground. Those same thick locks of dirty blonde hair were still spreading over her face. She wasn't having an easy time dealing with the situation. The sooner you realize the laws of warfare, the sooner you'll operate like a warrior is supposed to. There are no winners in war. Only survivors. We hadn't truly won here. This thing was just getting started. Nobody is guaranteed survival in war, especially spartans. I'm the only man standing from Noble team. John is probably the last of the Spartan II's, other than Linda. The lucky ones are the guys who live through it all. But seeing what the horrors of war can do to a person, it makes me wonder who is truly the lucky one.

No matter. I stood up and held out my hand for Marcon. He looked at it, then looked at me and hesitated. I understood. He was rising from the ground, but so many others wouldn't be rising. He'd been here before, but not often. Marcon wasn't used to coming so close to death, I could tell. His assault rifle had run out of ammunition, and he'd been forced to use a pistol. I take my hat off to him. Not many men could command under such pressure.

Marcon took my hand and I helped him to his feet. We faced the direction that the Covenant had run off to. The cycle was repeating itself once again, and every time it does, you get one step closer to death. You fight, you wait, and then you fight again. The ground was littered with bodies, and the marines were trying to gather their dead. Or, what was left of them.

"I'm glad you're here." Marcon said.

"We're in this together." I told him.

6. Chapter VI

Just a small event in the life of Noble Six.

****The Ghost of Noble Six****

****Chapter VI****

Do you ever get lonely?

Only around people.

* * *

><p>Many Years Ago...

I sat in the back of the class room, tapping my pen on my desk, watching the rest of the class. A window on the right side allowed a fresh spill of sunlight to come in, adding light to the already brightly lit room. Desks were lined up in perfect rows facing the front of the room where the teacher was busy writing a math problem on the board. The other kids either had their heads down or were paying half-attention to the teacher. There was a light chorus of chatter as some of the other students spoke to each other, laughing at jokes that I didn't hear. The teacher, Ms. Randall, finished her furious scribble across the front board and turned to face us. She stepped off to the side and waited for the chatter to quiet down and die away.

"Now, does anybody know the answer to the problem?" Ms. Randall asked, gesturing to the board.

The class was silent.

"Anybody?" She asked, searching for someone to call on. I slowly raised my hand.

"Yes, in the back?" She was eager to hear my answer.

"Is it 15?" I asked.

A smile spread across her face and she wrote the answer down on the board and circled it. I'd run the calculation through my head as she was writing it. Ms. Randall began to explain the answer to the rest of the class, and my mind drifted off. Her voice became background noise as I began to think intensely. I wanted to get home fast today. They'd been advertising the premiere of the 3rd season of Mighty Crushers, my favorite cartoon, and I didn't want to miss a second of it. The only problem was that I'd have to wait around after school because of detention. I'd earned myself detention for an entire month because of fighting, and I hated it. School wasn't meant to drag on longer than it was supposed to. Stupid school. I hate detention with a passion. They make you sit down quietly for a long time to punish you. If only that Jeremy guy had shut his mouth when I told him to. I wouldn't have had to knock him out like I did. Now I was going to miss Mighty Crushers. I balled up the sheet of paper on my desk and shot it into a trash can against the wall.

The bell was about to ring, and everybody began to gather their stuff to leave. Ms. Randall started to speak over the sound of backpacks being zipped up and books being closed. Don't forget your homework. Study over the weekend. Test on Monday. Her voice was overshadowed by the ringing of the bell and the loudness of students rushing to leave

the room. I stayed in my seat and watched the thick mob of students press out into the halls and beyond. If I didn't have detention, I would've fought my way through that crowd, rushed to my sister's classroom so that we could walk home, and then got away from the school as fast as possible. The class emptied out in record time. I sat there, waiting for my detention assignment. Sentences probably. There was another student staying after as well.

Ms. Randall walked over to my desk and I sat up in my seat.

"Now, just why do you have detention?" She asked, but she already knew the answer. She wanted me to confess my sins. Make me admit that I messed up. Her young features were lit up by the light from outside.

"Because he made me mad." I told her.

"You shouldn't let people get to you like that. You're smarter than that. You need to learn how to ignore people."

"I tried, but he still made me mad. So I hit him." She looked at me with a slight frown on her face.

"You can't go around getting angry and hitting people."

"He asked for it." I said in defense, crossing my arms over my chest. Ms. Randall sighed.

"Someday, you'll learn that violence doesn't solve anything. But today, you're going to sit in here and think about what you've done." She told me, and then headed towards the other student in the room.

I balled up another sheet of paper and shot it into the same trash can. Sitting there frowning, I thought about what she'd told me. He didn't shut up, so he deserved to get hit. Stupid fool. Ms. Randall was wrong about her ideas. I can go around hitting people if they make me angry. Jeremy had been bothering me all week long, and every time I'd told him to shut his mouth. But his mouth wouldn't close for some reason. He'd joked about me, calling me a punk in front of everyone. So I made him cry in front of everyone. It felt good to hit him as hard as I could, even though it scarred my knuckles. He'd fallen to the ground immediately and I'd kicked him in his gut several times. A smile spread across my face when I thought of that. It's the fourth time that I've gotten in trouble for fighting.

Ms. Randall walked to her desk, took out a test paper, and handed it to the other student. It was the girl called Katie, and I figured that she must be here to make up the test from Thursday. I could tell it was her from looking at her long hair. Katie talked too much. She always sat down by me at lunch, asking questions and talking all the time. I don't know why she always messes with me. She needs to find somebody else to speak to. During recess, she always follows me around. Whenever we play hide and seek, I always find the best spot, and she's always there to ruin it. I tell her to be quiet, but she always has to find something to say, getting us caught.

Maybe I have the wrong opinion of Katie. Maybe I don't. The next time she opens her mouth, I'll try to talk to her. It couldn't hurt, could it? Maybe that would get her to leave me be. Ms. Randall sat back

down at her desk, looking down, and began writing furiously as she graded papers from earlier. Katie turned around in her seat, smiling. I watched her, wondering what she was doing. She waved at me with a big grin on her face, and I did a slight wave back. It was tempting to tell her to turn around and shut up, but I was bored. So I made sure that Ms. Randall was occupied with grading papers, and then grabbed another sheet of paper from my notebook, except I didn't shoot it into the trash this time.

Hay, rite down the prohblims on this and I'll rite down the anserrs to thim. Make sher that Mizis Randahl don't see you okay? Hery up.

I wrote that on the paper. I folded it into a crisp paper airplane, a model that a buddy of mine showed me how to make. Checking one more time to make sure that Ms. Randall wasn't looking, I threw the airplane to Katie. I was afraid that Ms. Randall would see us, but she didn't. Kaite caught it, looking at it with interest. She opened it up and read it. I watched as another smile lit her face. She began to write down the math problems from the test, and I waited patiently. Looking out the window, I could see the school grounds as they began to clear up. Those students would be able to get home on time, unlike me. Everybody would be talking about Mighty Crushers next week, and I wouldn't know anything about it. Dangit. I've been waiting on this day for weeks. Stupid detention.

I turned my attention back to Katie as she refolded the airplane. She made sure that Ms. Randall wasn't watching before she threw it back to me. Her awkward girly throw forced me to lean out of the seat to catch it, nearly knocking my notebook on the floor and alerting Ms. Randall. I snatched it out of the air and opened it up, examining its contents. 35 math problems were written down in big, loopy, girly handwriting. I got to work on them, running several calculations through my head at once. The work was easy for me, compared to my peers. Almost too easy. I figured out several answers at once, writing them down next to the problem. When I finished, I wrote another note on the plane.

Your luky that I am hear becuzz you wudd fell and mak an F if it wuzzint for me. But its okay thoh. I hop that you past it, cuzz I mite got sum of them rong but I dont theek so. becuzz I am gudd at it so gudd luk.

I rechecked my crazy handwriting, looking over the sentences and problems, and then refolded the paper. Katie was waiting for me to send the airplane back. I double checked to make sure that Ms. Randall was working, and then threw it back to Katie. It bounced off of her hands as she failed to catch it.

Girls. Of course. She snatched it up from the floor quickly and mouthed a silent 'Thank you', and then worked on the test. I'd lied when I said 'I might have gotten some of them wrong'. That was just there to put doubt in her mind, so that she wouldn't feel so secure about getting answers from someone else. But I know that all of them are the right answers. It felt good to help her out on the test, even though it was wrong. I might be in detention, but I'm not a bad student. I frown upon cheating. But for some reason, I felt that it was okay to help out Katie. Strange. I don't understand what made me do it, but I don't feel bad about it.

I slouched down on my seat, resting my head against the back wall, and nodded off to sleep, thinking about Mighty Crushers.

7. Chapter VII

****The Ghost of Noble Six****

****Chapter VII****

A wise man, in times of peace, prepares for war.

* * *

><p>We didn't have much time left. The clock had been ticking since the beginning, and now it was running short. Covenant weren't used to getting sent back to where they came from. They'd regroup and throw more enemies at us. Looking around, I could see that there was no way in hell that we'd survive another assault like that. The number of marines that were capable of fighting had just about been cut in half. We didn't have much of a choice. I still don't think that we'd make it if we try to move somewhere. It was a situation of 'damned if you do, damned if you don't'. The truth of the matter was that I wouldn't be able to save these marines if we got attacked. All of them would die on my watch. Because I wasn't strong enough to protect us all. I stood on top of the alien structure, trying to think of a way to get ourselves out of the situation.<p>

There was small background noise from the marines as they chatted amongst each other. I could hear distant sounds of warfare. Somebody was catching hell, that was for sure. The sound of a machine gun was distinct and constant. It was a constant reminder that warfare was never far away.

I heard a voice next to me that sounded light, like an ocean at night time or something. That same one that had spoken to me earlier. I remembered that voice. I knew that it was Jennson before I turned to face her.

"What are we going to do?" She asked me. I didn't have a real answer.

"We're going to survive. We have to."

Jennson turned to face me. She was afraid.

"How are we going to do that?"

I didn't have an answer.

"Do Spartans ever get scared? Do you ever feel scared?" Strands of dark black hair hung down lazily over her face. She was asking too many questions. She was talking too much. But I could understand why she would speak to me, and I would do the same if I were in her shoes. It'd been a long day, plenty of lives were lost, the ship was shot to hell, and now the idea of survival was hanging by threads. Yes, I would also ask the spartan what to do. The problem with the question was that I wasn't sure if I should answer truthfully or not. Only a fool goes into battle without being afraid. If I said that I was scared, it would probably lower morale.

"Yes. Anybody out here who says that they aren't afraid is either a liar, or dead. But we're going to make it out of here. Trust me." I said to her. Jennson closed her eyes and let out a soft sigh. I noticed that her fingers were small and delicate, like a baby's. It was a strange thing to note, and I don't exactly know why I did. Strange that a marine would have beautiful hands like hers.

Out in the distance, I heard the faint roar of a pelican's engines. My attention snapped to it immediately, and I magnified the zoom in my HUD. Barely above a stretch of trees was a small dot, steadily growing larger. I knew that it wasn't a Covenant drop ship because it didn't have the right signs to be one. There would be more than one if it was Covenant. And it would be flying much faster. The outline of a UNSC pelican got larger and larger and the marines noticed it.

"Hey! 'S That what I think it is?!" A marine shouted from down below.

The commotion began to pick up as everybody spotted the incoming pelican. Cheers began ranging out. Marines began to clap for themselves, excited with joy. I watched as a smile spread across Jennson's face. It was hard to believe. I wasn't cheering like all the others for several reasons. The pelican was open for attack by any AA units that the Covenant had. The most critical part of any mission was the home stretch. Guards get let down, surprises get made, deaths happen. Mission failure.

My comm unit began to crackle and the sound caught me off guard. It felt like forever since I last heard it.

"-419 inbound ... -on my six!" I heard. The transmission was weak, but it was there.

"This is Noble Six of the UNSC _Pillar of Autumn, _send traffic again."

There was a short delay. I magnified the zoom of my HUD further and saw a pair of Covenant banshee fliers tagging the pelican with plasma fire. Shit.

"-Echo 419 inbound- ... -banshees on my ass!"

I reset the zoom of my HUD and immediately turned towards the machine gunner. He saw me approach and the smile on his face went away slowly. "Covenant banshees are in hot pursuit of the pelican. Tell Marcon to get everyone into cover and get ready. Make it quick." The marine scrambled to his feet, looking out at the approaching banshees. A look of terror was on his face. He ran off to spread the news, still staring at the pelican.

I stepped up the machine gun, gripped it firmly, and began to pull on it. I'd seen Jorge do it plenty of times, but the thing wouldn't budge. I'd need the machine gun to take out the aircraft. It was the heaviest thing that we had, and I would be slaughtered if I stayed stationary. Movement was key when fighting banshees. Split seconds are the difference between life and death. I pushed down with my legs and pulled up with my hands. It ripped off with a loud snapping sound, separating from the tripod that held it to the floor. I hefted

it with my dominant left hand on the trigger, realizing just how heavy the thing was. Jorge had made it look much easier than it actually was. The weight would throw my aim off a little, but it wouldn't make much of a difference. In theory, the weapon should make small work of the banshees. In theory.

The pelican was much closer now, a dark trail of smoke behind it. My radar had a flurry of motion on it as marines scrambled to find cover.

"I've got two enemy fighters on my six - I need assistance!"

"Listen, Echo 419. Lower your altitude and slow down when you reach our position. I'll take care of the rest."

I estimated about 30 seconds between us and the pelican. If the marines were out of cover, they'd be chewed up by the banshee fliers. We would get strafed, they would knock out as many of us as possible, and then continue hunting down 419. But I had another scenario in mind. By getting down low, the banshees would have to follow 419 to keep in range, getting them within strong distance of my machine gun. It would also leave them with little maneuverability because of the tree tops. Pelicans were built to fly in traffic, but banshees were more suited to do traditional fighter work like strafing and dogfighting. If Echo 419 slowed down like I told her to, then the banshees would most likely follow suit. They were too greedy to pull off and attack and simply fly past 419. They were too smart for that as well. If they did that, then they would be exposed to attack from the pelican. In theory, the plan should work.

My finger rested on the trigger and I loosened my muscles, preparing to evade any dangerous shots if necessary. Plasma rounds began scoring the ground as the banshees were getting closer and closer. They were taking shots at the dug - in marines. As soon as they got within range, I opened fire on the nearest one. The machine gun rattled in my hands with fierce recoil, and I struggled to keep it controlled. Heavy MG rounds began piercing the armor of the banshee, tearing into it ruthlessly. They'd slowed down to stay behind the pelican, and it allowed me to keep a bead on the targets. A wing was blown off and the banshee began to spin out of control, diving towards the ground. It erupted in a ball of blue flames before it crashed, igniting like a sun. Broken debris slid along the ground and tore into the vegetation. I moved my aim to the next banshee, being careful not to hit the pelican, and didn't take my hand off of the trigger.

Plasma shots began searing beside me, heating my energy shields. A couple of rounds struck me and drained my shielding to 68%. I didn't move, and continued pouring round after round into the banshee. Inky smoke trailed it and chunks of it's armor were blown off. The pelican flew by overhead and caused a deep vibration. An explosion ignited the rear of the banshee, tearing it in half right in mid air. There was a slight outline as the elite piloting it was vaporized. Half of the banshee flew off in a random direction, and the other half soared straight towards me at a blinding speed. I dropped the machine gun and bent my knees slightly to evade out of the way, but I was too late.

A huge chunk of banshee slammed into me and sent me flying backwards

with it. The breathe was knocked out of me and my vision went extremely blurry. I slid along the alien structure with the huge piece of alien metal crushing me. My energy shields were wiped out absolutely and my HUD was beginning to flicker and fail. Blood dotted the inside of my helmet and it felt as if I were about to die. Without slowing down, I slid completely off the top of the alien structure and plummeted to the ground below. My entire body felt battered to death when I hit the ground and I couldn't move. The large piece of banshee armor fell off as well and landed directly on top of my chest. If I hadn't been given superhuman injections during S-III boot camp, every bone in my body would've been shattered to pieces. My vision faded to black instantly.

* * *

><p>It was a dream, I could tell. Almost like a memory of something that never happened. I was standing on the edge of a cliff, staring out across a vast distance of black emptiness. Death roamed the ground beneath me with the ruins of a great city. Everything felt dead. There were no sounds that I could hear. I was staring at a waste land of burning ruins and nothingness. Was I dead? Was I in Hell? On the horizon, I could see great white flashes, like a vicious lightning storm was raging far off in the distance. The flashes of light were illuminating the far off pieces of dead city, and I felt as if I were looking at a graveyard of an entire civilization. It scared me. There was no essence on this world at all - it just felt flat-out blank. Like someone had sucked every bit of life out of it. The only thing that they left behind was the remains of someone's home.

Suddenly, I began to hear whispers around me. As a matter of fact, it sounded like the voices were inside my head, like some weird telepathic move. Frightened, I took a step back from the cliff.

"You..." A clear voice spoke. I shook my head to get rid of it, but I couldn't. "Your journey does not end here" I heard it say. I put my hands to my head, willing the voice to leave me, but it wouldn't. "Your soul may yet be saved from utter destruction. Death awaits those who do not possess the necessary will. Thousands before you have perished." I began to look around frantically, searching for the source of the whisper within me.

The voice trailed off, replaced by the sounds of people that I know. In front of my eyes, I began to see flashes of people. I saw my mother's face, but I couldn't hear her voice. I saw my sister. I saw the faces of Noble team. I saw Marcon. It felt as if I was hallucinating, but I stared at the anomaly that covered my vision. Hundreds of faces flashed before my eyes. I couldn't understand what was happening, and it made me want to hit something. Hit anything. The face of Jennson appeared in front of me. I let out a scream and closed my eyes, falling to my knees.

"You do not belong in the spiritual realm. But you... You have something within you, Coario."

Coario? Not Noble Six? It's been so long since I've heard that... So much time of being called Noble Six. Noble Six... Noble Six... Not Coario. Noble Six...

* * *

><p>"Noble Six!"<p>

"I hope he's not dead. Spartans can't die, can they?"

"I don't think he's gonna make it."

"Did you see what happened to him?"

My eyes snapped open and I was looking straight up, lying on my back. A wave of pain seared through me; I was hurting like hell. Blinking to clear the blur of my vision, I recognized Marcon standing above me, along with other marines. They were surrounding me completely, standing over me and watching. All of them. I let out a grunt and winced as a sharp pain cut through my ribs.

"He's ohkay!" The marines were clearly happy to see that I was alive. They were cheering. Marcon extended his hand down towards me and he helped me stand to my feet. I stood in the center of all of them, naturally taking a look around to gather in my surroundings. The half of the banshee that hit me was lying on the ground 5 yards away. Past the marines, I could see a damaged pelican resting in a clearing on the ground. The pilot was walking towards us.

"Gotta say, I can't believe you survived that, even for a Spartan. Damn you're tough." She said, taking off her flight helmet. "Thanks, by the way." The tag on her flight suit read Foehammer.

Marcon extended an assault rifle to me. "I think this is yours, Six." I grabbed it from him. "So, what now?" Marcon asked.

I took a long look around at the marines. "Did anybody get hurt from the banshees?" I asked.

"We're good."

Turning my attention to Foehammer, I stepped past the circle of marines. "Can your bird fly?"

"She's a little shaken, but she'll hold. Ready to get the hell out of here, right?" She asked. I smiled behind my helmet.

"Exactly."

8. Chapter 8

****ACT II****

****The Ghost of the Noble Six****

****Chapter VIII****

****Unknown location - Installation 04****

One last drop into hell.

One pod at a time.

One battlefield at a time.

One chance to do or die.

One more objective to finish.

One final look over the shoulder.

One last ride back home.

One last debriefing.

ODSTs are known for their tenacity. They're also known for their tendency to be deep behind enemy lines. Which, by default, meant that ODSTs were also known for their successful last stands. Which, in turn, reasonably led to the fact that ODSTs are also known for their high numbers of replacements. Some say that to be an ODST is to be the best. Some say that to be an ODST is to be more than a marine. Some say that it's impossible to be more than a marine.

Some say that Spartans never die.

Master Sergeant Louis Leppard had said a lot of things in his lifetime. Some of it had gotten him into fistfights. Some of it had gotten him into trouble. But most of it had been truth and fact. What he was saying right now was truth and fact.

"If we don't get out of these canyons, we're dead. We can't try the comms until we clear out of the valley. Covenant will swarm on us, but it's our only chance. We're ODSTs - we're supposed to be surrounded." He told his squad.

All of them were ready to die. To be honest, they were nearly _expecting _to die. Louis had banked a lot on that over the last few hours, and so far, his team hadn't let him down. Their faces were hidden behind sleek visors, but their body language spoke enough. After carving a path this far in these hills, they only had one more objective to finish. One final look over the shoulder. One last ride back home. One last debriefing. Louis was determined to make certain that all of those things would come true.

And so he stood up in the brilliant artificial sunlight, staring out across a maze of hills and pathways and rock, looking at the final objective. They had to get on the other side of this mess, and from where they sat, they could see the Covenant patrols fishing around within the sea of nature, kilometers out. Huge stone blocks were scattered about, separating the ground beneath it into small sections splitting off into hundreds of directions. A careless person could easily get lost in it. But ODSTs weren't careless. Helen, the squad sniper, pulled herself off of her perch overlooking the abyss below.

She slipped out of a tree gracefully and walked over to the rest of the squad. "I count 200 plus. Mostly grunts and jackals led by either single or pairs of elites. I'm confident we can evade most of them using the natural layout of the place."

Louis wiped grass pedals off of his helmet before putting it on. "We got this." He said. And he was confident of that. Of the six ODSTs under his command, Louis had no doubt that they were ready for

this.

"Sevv," Louis said, checking his MA5C one last time. He pulled the bolt back and the ammo counter jumped back up to 32. Originally - back before Reach was reduced to ash and ruin - he would've preferred the B-series MA5. It was older than its C and D counterparts, but the magazine shaft allowed for the larger 60-round mags, giving you more to work with in terms of ammunition. But all throughout the month of August, when Covenant forces had been scouring the surface of Reach, he'd been using the same MA5C that he was armed with right now. This gun was tried and true.

"Sir?"

"You have any family?"

"Just a younger brother. I haven't talked to him since he made it out of Jericho."

Louis wasn't intending on getting into Sevv's family history like that, but the mention of Jericho piqued his interest. "Jericho? I thought casualties were total?"

"Not quite. He told me some older Helljumper in the first wave warned him of the explosion - that's the only reason why he managed to get out alive." Sevv told him.

"You're taking point, Sevv. He won't miss you too much if you get knocked off."

* * *

><p>Alpha Base HS2604 - Installation 04

1850 Hours - GST

Coario-B312 hadn't been inside a base since the fall of Reach. There was always a certain flow to them; a unique aura that couldn't be found in any other institution. Alpha Base was no exception to this, despite how minuscule and scrappy it was. It was situated atop a mesa, not too far from the crash site of the Pillar of Autumn, decorated with odd, alien structures that didn't look Covenant. From memory, Coario knew intuitively that whatever had built them had also built the massive structure he'd fought on with the marines. They all seemed to be more like unorthodox statues instead of buildings. Coario didn't know what to make of it. UNSC ground forces had set up barricades and tents and other portable building structures around these glassy statues. This alien-UNSC hybrid base, while weak in terms of manpower, had a very formidable defensive position that made it highly valuable.

Coario was within the makeshift command bunker, standing at ease within the center of a short, hopeless excuse for a proper command room. The few tables within it were all littered with papers and ammunition crates. There were no monitors. A crude map of the local section of the ring surrounding Alpha Base was sprawled out onto the center table. It was dotted with Xs and Os and other symbols, giving a rough estimate of Covenant troop positions in relation to the base itself, along with a single stub of a cigar several inches away from the dot that marked Alpha Base. The stub represented the crash site

of the Pillar of Autumn. Another piece of that cigar was much further away from the dot of the base; it was the representation of the CCS-class battlecruiser that'd followed the Autumn to the surface of the ring. Lines and arrows criss-crossed the map itself. Coario had studied it in rapt detail upon entering the 'command bunker'.

Major Silva jabbed a sharp finger at the piece of cigar that represented the Covenant battlecruiser.

"I expect you to come back with the Captain. Alive." Silva said to the Master Chief, his teeth gritted on his grim, stout face.

Not long after Coario had made it to Alpha Base, he'd gotten a firsthand taste of the Major's disdain for Spartans. Coario had already known about the ODS'Ts perceived rivalry with the Spartans, but the Major was a different case all together. Silva had said some strong words to both 117 and Coario, and made a strong effort to express his feelings openly.

The massive Spartan-II was unmoved by Silva's tone. "Yes, sir." The Master Chief snapped off a crisp salute and departed the bunker, his facial expressions hidden by the helmet he seemed to never take off.

Coario had spoken to the Spartan-II briefly after arriving at Alpha Base. John-117. There had been, for the longest, rumors and stories that went with the name. After speaking with him in person, Coario had no doubt about the truth of those claims. All of the 2nd generation spartans had a powerful reputation, but none of them, individually, even came close to the Master Chief. Coario had much respect for him.

"And you," Silva said, his attention switching from one spartan to the next. His voice was oozing with bitterness. "We're missing a platoon-sized force of ODS'Ts who got separated during the drop." He looked over his shoulder towards his second-in-command, Lieutenant McKay. She stepped forward from a corner of the room, her tattooed head illuminated by the sliver of light coming from the doorway. "Give him the rundown."

McKay cleared her throat and swallowed. She was nothing like her CO. Silva had been nothing but cynical and sneering, but McKay had shown herself to be above petty rivalries. It showed itself in her voice - the note of bitterness nonexistent when she spoke. "The ODS'Ts got separated when their HEVs broke off from our formation after Covenant banshees strafed us on the fall. Thirty two of them in total. The trajectory of their descent suggests that if they made it to the ground, they should've landed somewhere here," she said, pointing to one of the circles on the map. It was noticeably cut off from Alpha Base by a long series of dots that marked possible Covenant positions. "Or here."

This time, she pointed at another circle not far from the first one. If the map was accurate, then the ODS'Ts had landed behind enemy lines, secluded deep within a series of gorges. In theory, that type of rocky terrain should be suitable for HEV pods. But if those Covenant banshees had tracked their landing site, then those ODS'Ts would be in the thick of combat. To be brutally honest, they were probably already dead.

"You want me to get them out," Coario said simply.

"Damn right," Silva replied, cutting McKay off before she could respond herself. "Like I told your friend - come back with the package _alive. _By any means necessary. Failure is not an option." He put extra emphasis on 'alive', drawing the word out as if Coario had trouble understanding directions.

Lieutenant McKay ran a hand through her short hair and took a step back. "Good luck, lieutenant." She said. And with that, Coario had his orders. He nodded once, put his helmet on, and strode out of the bunker.

In the small armory, which was a part of a series of underground caves and passageways, Coario came across several marines and ODSs, including Marcon and Jennson. They were gathered around the sizeable stash of weaponry and ammunition Lieutenant McKay had seized from the Pillar of Autumn. Shell casings and magazines were scattered about on crates of ammo and on the ground. Loading up magazines and prepping for combat, Marcon and Jennson were huddled cross-legged near a mountain of MG ammo-belts. They were going with the Chief on his mission to rescue Captain Keyes.

Coario nodded once to the pair.

"So, you're going to get those ODSs everyone's been talking about?" Marcon asked, looked up from the floor. "You know they're probably dead. No way in hell anyone's gonna make it out of that soup."

"Stop being so pessimistic." Jennson told him, frowning at him.

"I'm just being real."

Coario picked out a M392 and seven magazines of ammunition. The weapon was slightly worn and had carvings into the side of it. Whoever had been issued the rifle had kept close track of their kills. And they'd done well. Coario counted 39 notches on the left of the stock, and 27 more on the right. Sixty six kills. Before the day was over, Coario was going to boost that number up substantially. He slid the rifle onto his back and grabbed a belt of frag grenades.

The next weapon he grabbed was one of the few M41 SSRs in the armory. If Coario was lucky, then he wouldn't need to use it. But he'd always relied on preparation and instinct, and never on luck. He made sure to grab an extra 6 rockets for it. Finally, he grabbed an uncommon Misriah M6E and bolted it onto the side of the leg. This was all he needed.

"If they're alive, then they're coming back with me." Coario told the two marines.

Marcon and Jennson both stood up from the floor after getting geared up. Compared to Coario, they were almost miniature. The MJOLNIR armor added several inches to his natural height. Marcon was a full head and a half shorter than Coario.

Instead of saying anything, Marcon nodded once and tapped Coario on the arm before leaving the armory. Jennson stepped forward in his place, her head secured by a standard-issue combat helmet.

"Good luck, Spartan." She said in her light voice, looking up into Coario's visor.

If anyone needed good luck, then it would be her and the rest of the marines supporting the Chief. Coario's mission was easy in comparison. The last time he'd been in the belly of a Covenant ship, a Spartan had died.

He didn't say anything, however. Coario nodded to her, and she slipped by, following Marcon.

Coario focused his mind on the mission. He had a mental snapshot of the map in his head. The terrain that the ODS'Ts were in was very rocky and mountainous. Canyons and gorges split the area into dozens of smaller sections, each one a potential target location. Simply locating the ODS'Ts, _if _they were alive, would be a considerable challenge in itself. To top it off, Covenant activity was heavy in that location. Massive patrols were on the hunt for stranded survivors from the Autumn. Banshee squadrons were circling the skies like vulture, scouting for UNSC positions.

If the Covenant hadn't found those ODS'Ts, then it was remarkable considering that they'd managed to stay hidden for so long.

To cover the massive distance from Alpha Base to the canyons, Coario picked one of the only 2 mongooses in the makeshift motor pool. The return trip would have to be done on foot. Even taking the mongoose was a risk. Any vehicular activity could be easily picked up by Covenant sensors. Adding to that was the fact that there was no way Coario could bring enough troop 'hogs to carry 32 ODS'Ts in; not by himself. He would have to literally be driving a light convoy to pull that off.

Coario bolted the M41 onto the rear hatch of the mongoose and sat down in the driver seat, flipping switches on the handlebars and syncing his MJOLNIR armor with the vehicle, providing him with a real-time status monitor of it. Small icons winked on in his HUD. The fuel tank was at 71%, but the mongoose was in good shape. Mongoose bikes offered little in the way of protection. They had fairly moderate armor plating on all of its essential parts, but the rest was made out of a lightweight polymer. What it lacked in protection, it made up for in quickness and agility. The nimble vehicle could dart around a battlefield easily for a long time before it needed refueling. Originally, it'd been designed as a reconnaissance vehicle for scouting parties to use. It would be perfect for Coario.

As he cruised his way out of the motor pool through Alpha Base, Coario spotted John-117 loading equipment onto the bay of a pelican. Maintenance teams were surrounding the dropship, outfitting it with heavy armaments and replacing some of its cannons. The operation to rescue Keyes wouldn't be happening for another 2 hours from now, when the artificial night cycle of the ring switched on full time.

Coario took one last look at the base before he kicked the mongoose up to full speed, tearing away in top gear, kicking up dirt and grime. By his estimate, Coario had more than enough fuel to go top speed for several hours, non-stop.

As he sped off the mesa into a sea of boulders and trees and hills,

Coario relaxed his muscles and calmed himself, making sure to keep one eye on his motion tracker and the other on the ground in front of him. Although he was 'superhuman', spartans still required sleep. Not as much as an ordinary person, but it was still absolutely necessary, regardless. Trying to function as a soldier without maintaining a good mental and physical state was detrimental. Coario was a spartan, but he wasn't invincible. The only rest he'd gotten since getting out of cryo-sleep had come in the form of a strange unconsciousness he'd experienced after a close-call with banshee debris. Coario had been subjected to an unorthodox dream; almost like a hallucination. He hadn't thought much of it since the incident, but it still plagued his mind. _Perhaps it has something to do with mental fatigue? _Coario didn't understand it. If the hallucinations didn't stop by the time he got off the ring, he would go and see a shrink. Operating outside of his full-capacity could potentially jeopardize not only his life, but the lives of many others. Coario couldn't take that risk.

He steered the mongoose along a ridge, under cover of a canopy of trees, overlooking a deep valley down below to the left. A slender river snaked through it, carving a path through a rich coniferous forest. Trees sprouted upwards, standing tall and long. Even now, Coario was amazed to think that all of this had been artificially built. Everything he'd seen so far reminded him of Onyx. Creeks and rocky surfaces broke the forest into separate parts, teeming with bushes and shrubs and green grass. While it all looked natural, Coario had yet to come across any wildlife. Normally, a place like this would almost certainly have some type of local community living in it. Back during training, Onyx had practically been the 'base' that they'd operated on. The planet had only Camp Currahee and Zone 67, which had allowed for its entire surface to be used as a training ground. Coario had spent many days and nights living in ecosystems such as the one beneath him. There'd been times when he'd had to survive off of the land for weeks and even months, alone, and whilst being hunted by the DIs.

Coario hadn't realized how easy training had been until he was sent on his first mission. Ever since, he'd been longing for life to be as simple and easy once again.

Just as Coario sped down the side of the mini-mountain, emerging from the cover of trees, he began to hear the whining of banshees approaching from his right. He swerved the mongoose hard, taking full advantage of its nimbleness, kicking up a plume of dirt and grit as he darted back beneath the tree canopy. He was too late, however. Coario heard the unmistakable jump in power as the banshees sped up. They'd spotted him. Going back deeper within the trees wasn't an option; Covenant patrols would be scouring the area for him in less than 5 minutes, tops. He had to destroy the banshees and get as far away as he could. Heading back up the ridgeline would only put him into an even tighter spot.

Coario couldn't fight them on foot. Not two banshees at once. He was fast, but not that fast. So he propelled the mongoose through the canopy, heading into the direction of the banshees. At the same time, he reached behind him and released the bolt on the M41 rocket launcher. Thankfully, it was already loaded. He hefted the weapon with one arm while steering with the other. An ammo counter appeared in the top corner of his HUD, reading: LOADED; READY-TO-FIRE; 2.

As soon as he emerged from the trees, the banshees swooped down towards him, opening fire. Coario jerked the steering wheel around, dodging both plasma bolts and bushes. Hot plasma struck the ground around him as the pilots struggled to get an accurate shot on the nimble mongoose. Drifting around the side of a massive boulder that protruded from the ground, Coario took aim with the M41. He had to get a lock-on while dodging plasma rounds and vegetation. The two banshees sped by overhead just as he managed to lock with the rightmost one.

Coario swiveled the handlebars hard, switched the gear into reverse, and swerved 180 degrees, all the while maintaining his momentum and speed. He now faced the backside of the banshees. Without hesitation, he fired a shot off. The power of the rocket slowed down his speed to 120 KpH. A trail of white smoke tailed the banshee as the pilot tried evasive maneuvers. The second banshee was banking to the right, and Coario caught a lock-on. He fired his 2nd shot, slowing the mongoose down even more.

Without waiting to see the results, he pivoted the mongoose again and switched gears, spinning 180 degrees a second time without breaking speed. Facing the opposite direction once more, Coario hit the brakes and turned hard, narrowly escaping a head on collision with another gigantic boulder. He was only running 77 KpH, but it would've been enough to crumble the mongoose and detonate its fuel tank. If Coario would've somehow miraculously managed to survive being vaporized by the explosion and detonation of his extra 6 rockets, his means of transportation would be gone. As well as being caught out in the open with Covenant patrols speeding towards his location.

He sped the mongoose back up to full speed and began reloading the M41. Glancing over his shoulder once, he looked back just in time to see a bluish explosion pockmark the sky. The banshee was obliterated into a shower of debris and pieces. Coario didn't see the second banshee.

He finished reloading the M41 just as the mongoose sped up a slanted rock, getting airborne. Beneath him, a large creek bed filled with rocks sprawled out, running perpendicular to the rock. Coario landed just on the far side of the creek bed, nearly landing within it. Dirt and mud kicked up behind the mongoose as he accelerated. About 400 yards ahead of him was another thick tree canopy. The terrain was relatively flat from what he could see. If he got to it, he could have a chance at getting away. The 400 yard dash was populated with rocks and bushes and scarce trees. Having to wade through all of it would slow Coario down. He sped straight into it.

Weaving through the scenery as fast as he could was putting a strain on the mongoose. On his HUD, the fuel counter had dipped to 65%, and the two front wheels blinked yellow. Several other instruments within the mongoose icon were blinking as well, alerting Coario that he needed to reduce the stress put on the vehicle. It was an alert that he ignored.

Behind him, plasma bolts began smacking into the ground once again. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the second banshee gaining on him, it's front blasters flashing as the pilot unleashed a relentless hail of hot plasma. There was smoke coming from one of its wings, but the damage hadn't been enough to stop it. Coario gritted his teeth and gunned the engine, going even faster than he'd been before. In

response, the engine of the mongoose wailed.

The distance to the treeline had been cut to about 260 yards, but Coario wasn't sure he could make it. He cut around the side of another boulder and twisted in his seat, trying to get another lock-on with the M41. The targeting reticule in his HUD flashed red, and the word ::FIRE: appeared. Just before he could, the banshee illuminated a bright orange-green color as the pilot fired off a bomb. The fat blob of sickly green plasma sailed through the air on a direct collision course with Coario.

"Oh, no," Coario groaned.

He sped up the side of another slanted rock and whipped the tail of the mongoose, scrubbing through the air in a low arc. When he landed, another set of instruments on the mongoose icon switched colors to red. A warning sign began flashing. At the same time, the mongoose began fishtailing. Coario rode with it and brought the ATV under control, spinning hard to the right and then immediately back to the left, clearing the base of a small tree.

The plasma bomb hit the tree directly. He didn't need to turn around to know that the tree had been completely vaporized, as well as anything within 3 meters around it. A blistering wave of heat washed over him, even through his armor. It crackled his energy shielding and cut it all the way down to 34%. Coario felt as if he'd been laying on top of a bed of hot lava. He stifled the urge to cry out in pain.

Instead, he turned in his seat to face the banshee once again. With the damage to the wing it'd sustained, the craft was much slower than before, and not nearly as agile. Once again, the targeting reticule in his HUD turned red and urged him to fire. He did. The rocket took off at blinding speed, expending a trail of greyish exhaust in its wake. The banshee pilot tried to barrel roll out of the way. It was a futile attempt. A thunderous explosion dominated the area and shook the ground. All that was left of the banshee was a few pieces of debris that plummeted to the ground. Its remains rained down in a carpet-bombing fashion.

Coario was breathing heavily. He snatched the M41 back onto the rear of the mongoose, tucking it away for the time being.

But he wasn't home free yet. On his motion tracker, he picked up enemy targets just ahead of him. Seven red dots wavered just inside the treeline, and Coario could make out the unmistakable blue shielding of jackals.

Two jackals, grunts, and one minor elite. A Covenant patrol team. They'd shown up much faster than Coario had expected. Yellow and blue plasma bolts streaked towards him as he barreled down on their position. Coario jerked the mongoose to the right and then straightened it back up, pointing it directly at the two jackals who stood side by side. Gunning the engine up once again, Coario retrieved the M392 off his back and leaped off to the left from the mongoose. It'd been running 98KpH.

Coario hit the ground and slid with the momentum. Sliding along sleek blades of grass, he tucked and rolled. Keeping his momentum up, he leaped off the ground into the air, bringing the rifle up to bear.

Plasma shots cut through the air beneath him, harmlessly splashing into the ground and kicking up dirt. Down below, the single elite bellowed orders, shouting and pointing at the incoming spartan. Coario opened fire with precision. Accurate 7.62mm cut through the light armor of the grunts, tearing open wounds and splattering blood everywhere. One of the rounds tore through the head of a grunt, nearly severing it in half. Their bodies twitched and jerked as they got hit, and harmless plasma bolts streaked out in every direction. One of the wild shots nearly hit the elite in the head; it dived out of the way just in time. Barrel smoking and ammo counter down to 3, the M392 would already need four more notches into its side.

Coario hit the ground, sliding into cover within the treeline, firing off the remaining three rounds. They slammed into the elite but its energy shield withstood the barrage. The elite growled out in anger and fired off a response. Several bolts from a plasma repeater soared past Coario and others slammed into the tree in front of him. Wood chips tore off and showered him. One of the rounds came dangerously close to his head, and the wave of heat drained Coario's already weakened shields. His armor started beeping as the energy shielding fell to 15%. Coario tucked down tighter behind the tree and reloaded the M392.

At the same time, the two jackals were splattered into bits by the mongoose. A loud crackle split the air as their shields erupted. Blood caked the surrounding vegetation, painting it in its color. They hadn't even had time to cry out in pain.

Coario rounded the right side of the tree and opened up on the position of the elite. He saw its shield flickering under the barrage of FMJs. A desperate trio of plasma rounds fired back, but the shots were far too inaccurate, sailing by Coario harmlessly. The elite wailed out in pain as its shields finally broke. Pressing forward, Coario didn't let up on the trigger. Tearing through its armor, the 7.62mm bullets ruptured the chest and neck area of the elite. Blood spurted from the holes, and the elite fell to the ground, clutching at its throat and gurgling. Coario finished it off with a last shot to its head.

He fed a fresh magazine into the DMR and both of his ammo counters jumped back up to 15. Running to the location of the mongoose, Coario read the data streaming into his HUD from the uplink he had with it. Considerable damage had been sustained to its front bumper and the steering mechanism was jammed. Its fuel counter was down to almost halfway.

Coario walked up to it to survey the damage in person. Massive dents covered the front of it, and its steel protection-bumper had been bent at an awkward angle, pressing backwards into the mongoose itself. Chunks of armor had been torn off as well, but the rest of it seemed in okay condition. A jackal was smashed in between it and a large tree trunk. Slick blood covered areas of the mongoose, giving it a strange decal. The engine was cut off too, but the M41 was still bolted onto it.

Coario slung his M392 and strained to pull the mongoose out of its stuck position. Despite its small size, it weighed almost a ton. At first, it wouldn't budge. The wheels were dug deep into the ground and had it locked into place. Fearing that more Covenant patrols were on the way, Coario re-doubled his efforts and used every ounce of

strength he had, this time trying to shove it out of place. After putting everything he had into it, the mongoose' wheels finally caught traction and it began to roll effortlessly out of its hole. The jackal was plastered onto the front of it, and Coario had to pry it off. The sight was gruesome.

Because of the dents in the front section, its steering wheel was stuck into place. Coario had to flip it over to get everything back to where it was supposed to be.

After exhausting nearly 2 minutes of time, the mongoose was finally ready to roll once more. Looking back out where he'd downed the two banshees, Coario could just make out a massive patrol force headed his way. There were ghosts breaking off from the group, scouring several different locations. At least a dozen elite warriors of various ranks fanned out in a controlled, tight formation. They were supported by one wraith tank that crawled along at the back of the formation. It was protected by what looked like 2 squads of Jackals, formed up into tight phalanxes on either side. Small squads of grunts hobbled along in front of the patrol. Coario had no hope of taking on a force that size.

Not without more ammunition, at least.

As his energy shielding finally recharged, Coario hopped back onto the mongoose. At first, he couldn't get the engine to turn over. It took several tries before it roared back to life.

Overhead, the sky was beginning to grow dark as night time came about. Coario was in his element when he was in the dark. Plus, the darkness was an added bonus to help him evade anymore Covenant troops. He switched to reverse and backed up away from the dead jackal, orienting the ATV on his topographical map. He still had a ways to go before he reached the first possible crash site. If luck was on his side, then he would find something to help him track down the ODSs. Right now, he was almost searching for a needle in a haystack. He needed to make that haystack smaller.

Coario accelerated towards his objective, shifting gears until he got to 4th. He kept the speed at a moderate pace, careful to not agitate the engine anymore. Even though he'd cleared the jam in the steering, the mongoose still had a slight wobble to it and the handlebars weren't as responsive as before. He couldn't afford for it to sustain any more damage.

The first time he'd driven a mongoose had been on a long-term training operation back when he was 11 years old. He'd gotten separated from the rest of his group. They'd been hiking in a mountainous area, looking for an 'enemy' outpost that was supposed to be hidden deep within the hilly terrain. The goal had been Capture the Flag. All the other groups had already gone through the op, completing the mission with varying degrees of success. Coario's group had been the last one to do it. After stumbling across a large, company-sized unit of the OpFor, the seasoned marines had managed to rout Coario and the rest of the Spartan-III recruits.

In the ensuing dash to retreat, Coario had gotten cut off from everyone else by a warthog that'd been shooting hundreds of TT-rounds in his direction. Forced to find his own way out, he'd ducked and dodged for hours, desperately trying to keep ahead of the ruthless

marines. The game of cat and mouse had gone on for nearly the entire day before Coario ran right into the hidden outpost. He'd snuck into the base, well-hidden from the pursuing marines, but they alerted the base guards to his presence. Immediately, the outpost began swarming with teams hunting Coario down.

After roughly 2 hours of sneaking around the outpost, Coario had finally located the flag. It'd been protected by a full squad of marines, all of them armed with MA5Bs and nearly 1-thousand TT-rounds. It took Coario 5 minutes to come up with a plan to take them out.

The 5 marines had never known about his presence. Like a ghost, Coario had picked them off one by one, slowly and methodically.

Securing the flag without the rest of the marines even knowing, Coario slipped his way to the motor pool and hijacked a mongoose.

The marines hadn't even known the flag was missing until Coario made it back to home base, waving the flag around with a toothy grin plastered on his face, laughing so hard his ribs hurt. DIs Kurt and Mendez had looked at him with a confusing expression covering the both of their faces.

"Where's the rest of your team?" Kurt had asked, taking the flag from Coario's hands. The question had effectively ended Coario's laughing.

"Oh. Uh... I don't know...?"

After listening to Coario explain what'd happened, the two DIs had called off the operation and ordered the group to go through the mission again - except this time, Coario didn't have to. He'd bought himself an entire day free of calisthenics and training, gaining a day full of full-course meals and accompanying DI Kurt on his daily routines. It'd been the first time Coario had gotten a full belly in over a year.

Coario had always been strangely attracted to operating solo. It'd always come to him subconsciously for as long as he could remember. Looking back on it, the thought had never crossed his mind to try and link back up with the rest of his group during that operation. Not once had he wondered about their fates. In a sense, it'd almost felt free to be on his own, figuring out his own plan.

What Coario didn't know was if his affinity for lone wolfing was a good thing, or a bad thing.

* * *

><p>Temperate Habitat 142 - INST::04**

2140 Hours - GST

Spec Ops Officer Nato 'Kusovai watched as the many trees passed below his dropship, staring in silence at the beauty that his gods had crafted many years before him. Lush environments covered the surface of the holy ring as testimony to the awesome power that once blessed

the universe.

He seethed to know that the humans were desecrating it. And so he'd been more than happy to take on the mission to hunt down the lone Demon who'd been spotted earlier. The Prophet of Stewardship himself had deigned Nato and his squad worthy of the task. While Nato had little respect for the prophet, he couldn't help the surge of pride that'd seared through his blood.

"Commander! We have arrived!" Khel 'Madhakee barked from the cockpit.

Nato flexed his hands as the phantom swooped down over a high treeline, coming to a hover just above the ground. His second in command, Khel, barked orders to the two pilots before emerging from the cockpit, his Type-51 Plasma Rifle brandished and charging up. He fell to one knee, off to the right of Nato. The rest of his squad formed up, kneeling on the dropship before Nato, bowing their heads in deference. All of his warriors had been honed through years of glorious combat. All of his warriors were ready for this opportunity to inflict a deadly blow to the humans. To kill a demon. Nato had never been more proud of them.

"We are bound together, not only as brother, but by an oath!" Nato roared at his squad, pacing back and forth along the edge of the phantom.

"According to our station! All without deception!" They shouted back at him. Nato swelled with pride.

"Through pain... Through fire... Through _blood... _We shall always honor our Covenant!"

"Even to our dying breath!"

"Our enemies are vast. But _we _are the exterminator. _We _are the blade! We shall suffer not the wicked to live!"

"We shall grind them into dust!" The Spec-Ops squad bellowed at Nato.

It was time to begin the hunt.

9. Chapter 9

****Chapter IX****

****Unknown location - Installation 04****

****2355 Hours - GST****

Louis Leppard had used the VISR for the first time on Reach. It was, in essence, an information suite. At it's core, the VISR was a built-in computer that the UNSC starting installing into ODST helmets barely a year ago. Uses ran from real-time data uplinks to direct data linkage between an ODST and an AI. As a whole, the program was more than just a visual enhancement system, and it'd taken Louis several days of training before he'd gotten comfortable using the system. The rest of his squad, Delta-Four, had taken well over a week

to master it. VISR had its advantages and setbacks - the most notable of which being the fact that it was almost 'crippled' without the proper UNSC infrastructure that it relied on. Being on an alien ring gave the VISR only two truly useful features: FOF designations and low-light enhancement.

It came in handy. Delta-Four had made it roughly halfway across the vast gorge, with a ways to go still. Relying on silencers and darkness to help mask their presence, Louis had done good so far in maneuvering the squad.

He did a quick hand sign, and Sevv emerged from the cover of a trio of rocks, pressing forward up the hill at a slow pace. Two large, tall cliffs on either side of the squad covered Sevv's movements.

On Louis' VISR, Sevv was outlined in a crisp green color and could be seen clearly. Moving almost at a snail's pace, the ODST hit the dirt and crawled up the natural hill, his M7S held out in front of him. Sevv peeked over the rim of the hill for a brief moment, and then looked back at Louis, doing a quick series of sharp hand signals.

Five+ enemies. Clear to move forward. Use caution.

Louis nodded once and then did his own series of hand signals. The rest of Delta-Four slithered out from cover like ghosts, their blackened armor merging well with the darkness, like ghosts.

Louis made his way up the hill, careful to not make any noises. He kept himself pressed up against the right cliff. Pebbles and dirt crumbled beneath him, rolling down past Louis into the squad. Sevv pointed out targets as Louis made it to the peak, looking down at the scene below the squad. There was a squad of 5 grunts huddled around in a circle, barking and yapping at each other off to the right. A small cropping of bushes enclosed the grunts and cut them off from the rest of the Covenant infantry. Three jackals, all of which were sporting plasma pistols and plasma rifles, were squawking in their unorthodox language. On their wrists were the energy shielding devices, but they had them powered off. Overseeing things was a single elite minor. It was off to the left, sitting on top of a rock with its arms crossed, a plasma repeater strapped across its back. All of the targets were outlined in red by the VISR system. Nine targets in total.

Delta-Four had the element of surprise.

Helen crawled up next to Louis, her sniper rifle resting on the ground beside her. She leaned over and whispered, "I can take the hat off that elite."

Louis had never witnessed it, but Helen claimed that with her skills and her ammunition combined, she could take the hat off an elite at 2 thousand yards. That was over one mile. While Louis had never heard of anything like it being done before, he had confidence that Helen could pull something like that off.

Louis looked over Helen's back at the rest of the squad, save for the new guy who was on security in the back. Everyone was scanning out the Covenant troops. He put his head back down and whispered to Helen.

"Then do it. But wait until the shooting starts. Sevv and I are going to open up on the grunts. Everyone else focus on those three jackals in the middle." He said. He tapped on Helen's shoulder and she passed the word down the line.

Louis glanced over his shoulder at the new guy covering the rear. The private had been a replacement for Juliette Barnes, the former rifleman who'd gotten vaporized by a round from a Covenant Hunter. The kid had virtually 0 combat experience before the ODSTs had gotten shot out of the belly of the Autumn. So far, he'd proven to be competent.

Delta-Four was moving into position quietly, getting set for combat. Helen split off into the shadows as she took up a position that Louis couldn't see from his spot. Sevv sat up to one knee, his M7S sighted on the circle of grunts. Arkadios, Psamathe, and Lysimachus formed up into a firing line directly facing the jackals.

Louis wanted to use a frag grenade, but the explosion would be loud and could be easily traced by the Covenant. Every time Delta-Four engaged the enemy, they had to hurry and rush away from the scene, sneaking back into the shadows to keep the Covenant patrols from zeroing in on them. The less firepower they used, the easier it was to pull that off. So far, they'd been lucky, managing to stay one step ahead of the Covenant. Louis had yet to walk the squad into something they couldn't take on with small-arms. They had to be quick, efficient, and clean. The Covenant might not be the smartest when it came to battlefield tactics and grand strategy, but they made up for it in almost every other warfare discipline.

Louis checked his MA5C and made sure that the sound-suppressor was sealed. Holding up his left hand, he counted down from four with his fingers.

He took aim and opened fire.

His first salvo of 5 rounds shredded into the closest grunt's back. Blood erupted from bullet wounds in its legs and arms, and its backpack cracked open and leaked gas. It fell to the ground in a heap. The other grunts jumped back in reaction, yapping in sudden fear. Somewhere in Louis' subconscious, he heard the loud thud of a suppressed sniper shot, but his attention was directed on the grunts. The rest of the squad opened fire. Louis switched targets to the next grunt and fired off another burst. The grunt fell to its knees as its legs were clipped and torn into. A pair of rounds slammed into its head and neck area, and the grunt died before it hit the ground completely. Sevv and Louis finished off the remaining grunts in record time, their precision honed through years of combat experience and instinct.

Once again, Louis heard another sharp thud from the suppressed sniper rifle.

In front of the squad, the last jackal was desperately trying to fend off the hail of bullets as it struggled to keep its shield raised. It managed to get off a pair of shots. Two yellow bolts of plasma sizzled upwards, illuminating the air around them and the ground beneath them. The orbs were brighter than normal due to the VISR low-light. They flew overhead harmlessly.

At the same time, the elite minor twitched a final time. It died clutching at a hole in its neck. Everything else was dead.

"It's time to move," Louis urged the squad, his ears picking up on the sound of Covenant engines whirring up somewhere in the distance.

* * *

><p>Temperate Habitat 151 - INST::04**

0115 Hours - GST

Coario-B312 pulled his knife out the neck of the final jackal sniper, the blade slick in dark purple blood. It plummeted to the ground below and crashed, its bones audibly snapping from the impact. He ran the blade through his gloved fingers once, and then sheathed it.

Over the last few hours, the Covenant patrols had died down quite considerably. After his encounter with the banshee squadron, Coario had only run into a handful of small patrols afterwards, most of which had been largely made up of grunts - save for one encounter with a random pair of hunters. All throughout that time, the Covenant had been struggling terribly to zero in on Coario. But that'd been well over an hour ago. He hadn't so much as seen another patrol since the last one. The three jackal snipers he'd just run into had been holding their positions rather than scouting. Other than that, there hadn't been much static from the Covenant.

It made Coario uneasy.

Being alone in the middle of a dense forest wasn't what had him on edge. The quietness and solitude was a welcome addition, as it helped him to keep focused. Long ago, Coario had learned to trust in his instincts. His instincts, over the last two hours, had been plying him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. There was a distinct sense of danger that hung over him. At first, he'd thought it might've been the 3 snipers. They'd nearly caught him off guard. But after taking them out silently and efficiently, Coario still had that same feeling, deep within his chest.

He pulled off his helmet for a brief moment.

The night time air felt crisp and soothing to his skin. Crouching down low on the tree branch the jackal had been using, he had a clearer line of sight up into the 'atmosphere'. Somewhere, very far off, he could see the other end of the ring. Even now, the sheer magnitude of the engineering prowess it took to build the ring had Coario scratching his head. He couldn't even comprehend what power these aliens must've possessed. Everything reminded him of Onyx. The air, the scenery, even the smell seemed familiar. Had he not known better, he would've thought it actually was Onyx, or some similar planet. He took a deep breath and then donned his helmet once again, its advanced night vision system highlighting everything within 2-thousand yards.

Coario slipped out of the tree gracefully and checked his map. He'd gotten much closer to the crash site. If the mongoose hadn't gotten

blown up by those two hunters, he would've reached site #1 over an hour ago.

The operation to rescue Captain Keyes was in full-swing by now. Somewhere out there, some serious fighting was going on right about now. Coario had no doubt that the Master Chief would succeed, but he wasn't so sure about the marines who'd gone with him. Including Marcon and Jennson.

He refocused his attention on the task at hand and set off at a brisk jog - not quite fast enough to be a sprint, but not slow enough to be merely a trot. The trees and bushes slid by him without much notice. To a bystander, it would look like a wraith drifting through the shadows, well hidden within the darkness. A ghost. Coario made sure to keep his noise level to a minimum and to keep his senses as sharp as possible. While the Covenant presence in the area was almost gone, he wouldn't risk lowering his guard even a tad. Countless operations deep behind enemy lines had taught him that lesson. Back when he'd been more of a bane - a tool, rather than a weapon.

Coario's first deployment had come within 1 week of completing training. It'd happened so fast. One minute, he'd been taking orders from Mendez and Ambrose. The next, he'd been assigned to the UNSC *Gorgo*, a stealth prowler-class ship that most in the UNSC didn't even know existed. Commander Hakiro Tsunaya had been running a black-ops ONI operation to dismantle key Covenant and Insurrectionist institutions deep outside of UNSC territory. The commander had utilized Coario to the fullest. Within one year of graduation from training, Coario had already crossed out numerous names on a seemingly endless list, both Covenant and human. He'd wreaked havoc on Insurrectionist regimes, and had broken down multiple chains of command within the Covenant, along with the destruction of a massive Covenant naval base. That'd been Coario's service record, all the way up to Reach.

Irony. As successful as he'd been in every mission that'd been tasked him, Coario had never once fought in a true battle until the fall of Reach - a battle which had resulted in a Covenant pyrrhic victory. A failure. One that Coario personally felt responsible for.

Coario dipped around the base of a massive tree trunk and came up on a sudden drop. He leaped into it and slid down the hill, rolling once he finally hit solid ground once again.

Almost instantly, his battle instincts jumped; he wasn't alone.

Coario stood up at the base of the hill and scanned around in the darkness, his M392 DMR sweeping around 360 degrees. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he sensed imminent danger. The foliage was more thinned out than it'd been at the top of the rise, but it was still a tedious process to assess every direction carefully.

Coario switched his visor settings several times, going from thermal to low-light, and back to nightvision. There was movement on his motion tracker, but he couldn't rely on it in the jungle; everything moved here. Even still, he kept a close eye on it and moved forward at a snail's pace, his weapon sweeping around in a smooth pivotal

motion. Early on in his career, Coario had learned to always trust in his instincts more than anything else; his sixth sense had saved him far more often than any other information-gathering tool.

His instincts had been what gotten him off of Reach.

After progressing forward a ways, Coario was just about to relax slightly, until he heard a distinct movement off to his right.

His superhuman reaction was near-perfect. Swiveling to face the sound, all he saw was a small creature darting from behind a barrel-sized tree trunk. It was small, but moved so fast that it looked more like a blur of motion. Whatever it was, it darted off in record time, leaving behind a trail of broken twigs and leaves. From what Coario had seen, it'd looked like a cross between a squirrel and a miniature moa.

All during his time on the ring, Coario had never encountered any indigenous species, and had begun to think that it was bare of them. The creature had most certainly never seen a human before.

Coario sighed and lowered his rifle.

As soon as he did, he heard a heavy thudding of footsteps coming from behind him, as well as the unmistakable sound of an energy sword charging up.

Coario spun and opened fire instantly. A camouflaged elite bellowed out a guttural warcry, its armor shimmering as 7.62mm FMJs pounded it. Coario had run across the active camo system numerous times in his past, and only certain elites were given it.

The system faltered under fire. The elite didn't. Deep bluish armor flashed to life and two small, crystal clear energy blades crackled in the night, emerging from both of the elite's hand armor casings. Despite the hail of ammunition, the elite's shields held and it barreled down on Coario. He tried to dive out of the way, but it charged into him directly.

The breath whooshed out of Coario's chest and flew several meters back, sliding on the slick dew-covered grass. Before he could react, the elite was already on him again, yelling out a triumphant cry. It leapt into the air, and Coario rolled out of the way just in time; the two energy blades buried into the ground right where his head had been a split second earlier. He kicked off the elite, sending it into one direction and propelling Coario into the other. He fired off the last few rounds in the magazine and the gun ran empty.

Rolling over his back and onto his feet, Coario already had his M6E up and firing, but the elite was already rushing towards him once again. That was when he realized that he was dealing with something dangerous. A Commando Elite. Only 5 times in his entire career had Coario encountered Commandos. Every single time had been a close one. They were the closest thing the Covenant had to match the Spartans.

Muzzle-flashes broke the night air as he opened fire on the elite. Despite the drilling, the elite's shields held strong. Coario ducked beneath a swipe; an attack that would've severed his head. He crouched low and threw a straight jab into the elite's stomach. Visor

only inches away from its belly, Coario fired off a pair of shots into it; an elbow caught him on the side of his head and sent him reeling off to the left.

Coario spun just in time as the elite stabbed at him. Coario gripped its arm like a vise, twisted it hard, and yanked on the elite. Using its momentum, Coario magnified the blow of his headbutt, shattering the energy shielding of the elite. It roared in agony, enraged by the blow.

Before Coario could react, the elite spun out of his grasp, its other arm swinging in an upwards arc. The attack tore through Coario's energy shielding, slicing through the MJOLNIR armor like butter.

Searing hot pain blinded him; the pain in his shoulder the only thing he could focus on. He couldn't help the growl that came out of his mouth.

Another blow came towards his head, and Coario had just enough sense to lean back and dodge it. Without the use of his right arm, Coario was in fatal danger. He straight-kicked the elite in its chest and it stumbled backwards. Without hesitation, he opened fire on it. This time, his rounds struck the mark. With no energy shielding, the elite's armor cracked underneath the pressure. Blood erupted from a series of gunshot wounds all over its neck and chest. It fell to its knees, and Coario finished off with a single round to the head.

Breathing heavily, Coario gritted his teeth and unloaded the rest of the magazine into the elite. He stalked off, clutching his shoulder and searching for his DMR.

He found it several yards away and clipped it onto his back, taking one last look at the elite. The two energy daggers died out, casting the elite in darkness and shroud once again.

Commandos. The implication of that fact instilled some fear into Coario.

They never worked alone. Which meant that there were even more of them out there somewhere. With the way that last encounter went down, Coario was certain that he was being hunted. Which explained why Covenant patrols had disappeared; the banshees had reported a Spartan operating in the area, and their response had been to sic a Commando team on the case. Elite Commando teams were used often to kill off key targets in the UNSC; targets of opportunity. Sabotages. Raids. Rescuing POWs. Their track record closely resembled that of Coario's. They were never utilized on the frontlines like conventional troops. Stories held that when Commandos showed up, no one survived to tell the tale. Which was self-contradictory, but true.

No doubt, Coario was being hunted by a team of them. His primary objective had just switched from finding the ODSTs to picking off his predators, who were undoubtedly converging on his location.

The wound in his shoulder didn't feel deep - the blade had barely connected - but Coario could barely move his right arm. The pain was a living, manifesting annoyance that had half his upper-body in a state of emergency. While he knew the inner-workings of his armor

intimately, Coario had little idea on where to even begin taking it off; let alone putting it back together. Status monitors within his HUD urged him to seek immediate medical attention, and luckily, Coario had brought a medkit with him.

After injecting biofoam through one of the ports on his armor, and subjecting himself to even more pain for a brief moment, which had felt more or less like having hot sand running through the wound, he vanished into the darkness.

The commando elites were different from traditional Spec-Ops units in more ways than just usage. From what Coario knew, only certain warriors were allowed even the chance of becoming commandos. Only the most experienced and skilled could be picked. As far as Coario knew, he could be going up against the Covenant equivalent of Noble Team. The thought both angered and focused him.

He managed to climb up into the trees, preferring to move up top than on the ground. Early on in life, way back in training, he'd learned the benefits of moving along the higher ground when under pursuit. To think - his instructors had been preparing him for this exact situation, all those days of when he learned the skills of evasion. Coario had always been gifted at it.

Keeping his movements precise and calculated, he crossed from tree to tree while making the least amount of noise as possible. The elites would have their eyes on the ground; a hope, rather than a fact. Elite regulars wouldn't think to check their upper, but Coario was dealing with the best of the best.

* * *

><p>Coario was in position very high on a hidden tree branch roughly 150 meters away from where he'd killed the elite. The spot was well hidden behind a thick wall of leaves and larger, swirly things that could best be described as flower petals. The local flora had been relatively similar to that of Onyx, but there were occasional exceptions that defied Coario's grasp of biology. Camouflaged by accenting color patterns, the spartan was well hidden from view, deep within shadow and unmoving. Masked within foliage as he was, Coario had a straightshot view of where the dead elite lay.<p>

Active camouflage was one of their biggest advantages, but the commando elites would never dare leave a dead brother behind.

Visor set to thermal imaging, he waited patiently, lying on his front across the wide branch. Utilizing the shape of the branch, Coario molded himself into it and rested his head on his left arm. He let his right arm rest freely off to the side. The dull pain in it was the only distraction he had.

Coario switched the visor back to nightvision and magnified his view to 3x.

Four minutes later, he began to see movement. Dust and grit shifted unnaturally in the air. Light bended awkwardly at strange angles. Bushes and branches began moving in chaotic patterns. All signs of active camouflage.

An elite materialized out of thin air, standing over the body of its

dead comrade. Its camouflaging system deactivated, Coario could clearly see it. Adorned in pitch black armor, emblazoned with alien hieroglyphics and battlefield scars, the elite gave off the distinct impression of being a leader. A commander. It knelt down next to the commando Coario had killed, pulling its helmet off. Even from where he rested, Coario could make out the elite's mandibles as it spoke a prayer over the dead elite.

After a brief moment of silence, the elite stood back up, re-equipped its helm, and made several hand signals. At once, all the rest of the commando squad disengaged their active camouflage. It was then that Coario realized what he was dealing with.

Every single one of them were sporting high-powered Covenant weaponry - unordinary weapons that didn't get employed often. Two of them were sporting concussion rifles, with secondary plasma repeaters strapped across their backs. Coario had gained intimate knowledge of the concussion rifle back on Reach. While they didn't have the explosive power of a fuel rod gun, their concussive stopping power could easily dominate a position with suppression. It didn't even have to land a direct hit to do damage to a person's insides.

Another one had a needle rifle - which wasn't so dangerous - but across its back was a fuel rod gun. That type of firepower was used to destroy light-mid vehicles and bunkers. It was also useful in destroying spartans. A last one was hefting a plasma cannon. Coario gritted his teeth. Plasma cannons were guns used to control entire battlefields. It was, in essence, a high-powered plasma machine gun. The philosophy behind its design was that the Covenant could dominate massive lines-of-sight with one grunt.

Five of them in total.

As they pressed forward, one of them carrying the dead elite, Coario slunk out of his position slowly and carefully. Taking a moment to scan his map, Coario realized that they were calling off the hunt. The path they were taking would lead them into one of the Covenant-controlled areas, far away from the ODST drop zone. On paper, it looked like the commandos were fleeing the area. Coario knew better. They would take the time to drop off their fallen squadmember before getting back into the mix, hunting Coario with a renewed effort. Elites would rather die than run away from a good fight.

They made good progress, keeping a moderate pace while making certain to keep every sector covered. Coario couldn't even think about moving in without getting caught. In a slightly staggered line, they carved a path through the forest, with no chattering amongst themselves.

Coario kept a safe distance, making sure to stay out of sight. Without his right arm operating at 100%, he couldn't hope to take on the entire squad. Not with the type of weapons they were packing.

"'Til next time," Coario whispered. But just before he turned to slip away, the elite on point held up its hand.

Instantaneously, the entire squad slunk into the shadows. The elite carrying the plasma cannon walked up to the point elite, and Coario

froze. They were looking directly at his position.

They couldn't have seen me...

It aimed the plasma cannon right at Coario's position, and he felt his eyes widen. Luminescent blue heat warmed up the barrel of the gun. Coario failed to hesitate and leaped off of his perch, barely escaping a hail of plasma.

He felt the heat on his back on his way to the ground. Hitting the ground running, Coario cursed beneath his breath and primed a frag grenade. Hot plasma smacked into the trees and vegetation around him, and he heard the unmistakable discharges of concussion rifles. Wood chips and bark exploded all around him as the commando squad concentrated their fire, following at a relentless pursuit.

A round from the plasma cannon caught Coario in the back.

It sent a powerful wave of heat across his upper torso and did a number on his energy shield. The round's force alone knocked him off balance, sending him straight to the ground. Coario tucked and rolled, came up on one knee, and tossed the grenade back at the elites.

Without waiting to see the results, he took back off in the opposite direction, dipping and ducking to keep them from getting a solid shot off. Concussion rounds split tree trunks and opened up small craters. The intense concussive sensation was almost nauseating, and Coario felt immense pressure within his gut. Each time a round exploded, it sliced away at his shield, piece by piece. Coario glanced over his shoulder just in time to see a fat blob of yellow-green plasma sailing towards him - a round from the fuel rod gun. He dived to the right, rolling out of the way as the massive plasma bomb soared past. It splashed into a boulder 10 feet ahead and boiled away at it, carving a deep hollow into its smooth surface. Had he kept on course, the round would've detonated, at best case scenario, right next to him, which would've fried both his shielding, half his armor, and half his body.

Somewhere behind Coario, the frag grenade exploded. Coario saw the effects on his motion tracker as two of the red dots suddenly broke off into different directions. The other dots were spaced evenly, their formation meant to pin Coario into a tight circle.

He wouldn't let it happen. Coario had big guns, too.

He grabbed the M41 off his back, checking to make sure that it was loaded and prepped to fire. According to his radar, a pair of the elites were closing in at 8 O'clock. Up ahead, another boulder protruded from the ground. It arced upwards at an angle, its peak at about 12 feet off the ground. Coario sprinted up the rock and leaped off the top of it. Flying through the air, everything slowed down almost imperceptibly. He twisted in mid air, fired off a rocket in the direction of the two elites, and landed in a smooth 360 spin.

A response came in the form of a concussive round landing less than 5 feet away. It lifted Coario off his feet and sent him to the ground.

He ignored the pain blistering his insides and rolled to a crouching

position, firing off the second rocket and setting the M41 off to the side; the time for running was over.

Off in the distance, his first rocket exploded, closely followed by the second one. Two plumes of dirt and mud spewed upwards in rapid succession.

Coario broke off to the right, unslinging his DMR. Ambidexterity built into him through years of training, he easily handled the weapon in his left hand. The pain in his right arm had reached the point where Coario couldn't use it, period. Shelling by concussion rifles only made it that much worse.

On the motion tracker, 4 red dots began closing in on him, all coming from different directions. Coario welcomed the challenge.

* * *

><p>Temperate Habitat 158 - INST::04**

0202 Hours - GST

Nato 'Kusovai's Type-51 had been custom-designed for effective use in both mid and long range combat. With supercooled conducting coils installed around the plasma-magnetizer, it could fire at a sustained rate for far longer than conventional Type-52 rifles. Servants from the engineer corps had spent an entire week on the design.

Nato 'Kusovai dived past a shattered tree trunk and opened fire on the demon's position.

There was a blur of motion and a quick shift in the shadows, and then Nato was hammered by several shots, breaking his camouflaging system and shimmering his shields.

Nato growled and slid behind a rock, barking out orders over the squad-channel. "'Madhakee! 'Khasamee! Advance on him! _Now!_"

"Aye, Commander!"

Nato popped out of cover and unleashed a sustained burst of fire, forcing the demon to keep its head down whilst drawing the attention. It darted from cover to cover, desperately trying to avoid getting hit. Flashes of explosives lit the night as concussion rounds blew away cover effortlessly. A constant hail of fire from 'Khasamee's plasma cannon drilled away into the forest and Nato could see the demon's shields flaring up. Dashing through the night like a ghost, it moved faster than any other Nato had encountered. _Could it be _the _demon?_

Nato broke from cover and pressed forward, coordinating his advance with 'Khasamee's positioning. 'Jhuromee was hanging back providing covering fire with his Type-31.

After another series of concussion rounds pounded away even more cover, Nato holstered his Type-51 and released _Glorious __Kusov_ from its hatch. For decades, the blade had been passed down throughout Nato's family. It'd been used by his father, his father's father, and several more father's before him. The blade had even seen action during the great Unggoy Rebellion. As a youngling, Nato's

brother Bero had always outskilled him in the arts of the sword. The result had been their father blessing Bero with _Glorious Kusov _upon their induction into the military.

Nato had won it from Bero in a prolonged duel only two months ago.

He ignited the blade, it's crisp vibrancy casting light onto Nato's blackened armor. Before the night was over, it would be bathed in the blood of a demon - Nato would make certain of that.

He charged up a slope, heading straight for the small rise where all of the shooting was taking place. He'd been too far away from the action for far too long. Leaping over a blown down tree, Nato surged forward with a renewed effort, closing the distance as fast as possible.

A massive explosion rocked the night; the deafening roar drowned out any and all sound. It was so bright that Nato briefly thought a miniature sun had formed out of nothing. Had he not been wearing the Commando-issue assault harness, Nato would've surely been blinded. He had to kneel down to keep from losing balance as the ground shook violently. The only thing left behind was a 25-feet wide crater - a crater that covered up the ground that 'Madhakee and 'Khasamee had been at.

"Khel!" Nato shouted over the squad-channel. "Khel, status! Mdal'a!?"

There was no response from either of them. Nato was speechless. _What'd happened?_

"'Jhuromee." Nato's voice was grim.

"Commander - I don't see neither Khel nor Mdal'a. I've lost sight on the demon as well. What happened?"

Nato cursed and scanned his surroundings. "Hold your position, 'Jhuromee, and cover me. I'm going in to finish this damnation!"

"We need to work together to -" 'Jhuromee was cut off suddenly, and his com uplink turned into static.

No.

Nothing had gone the way it'd supposed to have gone. Problems like this arose when subordinates failed to follow their orders and training properly. Nato cursed again and sprinted off into the direction of 'Jhuromee. If he got there fast enough, he could catch the demon. He used his blade to carve a path through the thick foliage, slicing and swishing in a blind fury. Had 'Jhuromee done his job properly, the demon would never have slipped past them. The _fool. _

Exuding rage and determination, Nato split the distance in record time.

He found 'Jhuromee dead, sprawled out in a pool of sickly wet blood. The handle of a human blade protruded from 'Jhuromee's head.

Nato was finding too many dead brothers today. He pulled the blade out and tossed it aside, staring at the dead corpse in silence. 'Jhuromee had served faithfully alongside Nato for a long time. Their two careers had always been entwined since Nato first earned the title of warrior. The only thing that'd held 'Jhuromee back had been his inability to grasp complex battle tactics. Some had considered 'Jhuromee a fool. A skilled fool, but a fool nonetheless. 'Jhuromee's lack of tactical prowess was, arguably, the only reason why Nato was promoted to Commander.

"Show yourself, coward!" He screamed.

Several flashes lit the woods somewhere close by, and a quick succession of bullets hit Nato from the right. He rolled out of the way instinctively and came back up with a plasma grenade in hand, tossing it into the direction of the demon. The blue orb arced across the nighttime sky, and Nato followed it, closing the distance while brandishing _Glorious Kusov. _Two more shots hit Nato in his chest but he ignored it, his rage fueling his actions now.

Nato sprinted through a bush with his sword held out in front of him, barreling down on the demon's location. The plasma grenade went off and briefly illuminated the surrounding area. There was a shimmer of energy shielding - it outlined the demon. Nato let out a triumphant growl.

He tore through a final bush, his blade set to strike, but saw nothing.

"Wha-" Crushing weight landed onto Nato's back, his knees buckling under the pressure as a hand gripped firmly around his neck.

But Nato had trained extensively in hand-to-hand combat. It saved his life - at least, for that moment.

Nato reacted almost instantly, throwing his weight forward and sending the assailant over his shoulder. The demon landed on its back and Nato followed through with a stab. _Glorious Kusov _sunk deep - into bare ground. A boot caught Nato from his right and snapped his head. He pulled the blade out of the ground and swiped it through the air in one motion, but he hit nothing. The demon was too fast.

Nato rolled backwards instinctively, anticipating the attack, and dodged another deadly kick. This time, Nato was ready. He got to his feet and charged forward, slamming directly into the demon and driving it back. All his life, Nato had been preparing for this one fight. He wouldn't let this sacrilegious serpent desecrate the Holy Ring any longer.

Together, they both yelled at each other as Nato bulldozed the demon backwards. They slammed into a tree, and Nato pinned it with his free arm. Helmet to helmet, face to face, they struggled against each other. But Nato was stronger. He wrenched his hand free from its grip and attempted to slash the demon's head off. It ducked, barely dodging the fatal blow. In response, Nato felt a leg step behind his, then the demon pushed. The move was designed to make Nato fall, and so he did.

He hit the ground and rolled backwards, using his momentum to create distance. On equal footing, he could finally put an end to this

fight.

Drawing his blade off to the side in preparation to sever the demon, Nato smiled beneath his helmet. He set up to propel himself forward, but an explosion cut him off, shattering his energy shields and stopping him in his tracks. Mud spewed upwards and caked Nato's armor; he had to put a hand up to shield himself. It sent him down to one knee.

The smoke cleared up. Nato shook off his brief disorientation and looked up, but saw nothing. The only thing left behind was a small crater in the ground. The explosion had blown open a hole in the tree, and it came crashing down. Nato leaped out of the way just in time - it slammed the ground right where he'd been at.

Dust shrouded the air, but Nato ignored it, looking around for the demon. He'd been so close to killing it. It was too fast, already disappeared into the shadows. Gone.

"No!" Nato screamed, his anger and rage clouding his vision.

10. Chapter 10

****Chapter X****

****Unknown location - Installation 04****

****0740 Hours - GST****

The old saying is that you knew the risks when you enlisted. That you knew ahead of time what would be demanded of you as a warrior. In the old days, when humanity thrived upon earth alone, being a soldier was seen as a very strong position, filled with glory and bravery and honor. Fighting for one's country, marching into battle, facing the enemy head on; those were the days when warfare was simple. One general, several key lieutenants, and an army of thousands of men ready to fight and die at the command.

Now, all of that was pure bullshit.

There was no honor or glory in this war. The only thing that existed for humanity now as survival.

That same survival mentality was the only thing that you 'knew' when you enlisted. Because there's no telling when it comes to the Covenant. To enlist was to dedicate your life to fighting for survival, pure and simple.

Louis Leppard hadn't known any of that when he'd enlisted. The war had been in its infancy stages, and large parts of the Covenant had still been a mystery. His first deployment, however, had shown him all he needed to know about the Covenant. Their efficiency. Their ruthless spirit. Their fanatical dedication to the extermination of humanity. Louis had seen dozens upon dozens of ODSTs, men and women that he'd trained alongside for months, get vaporized and blown to bits over and over for hours on in. At the end of the day, only the sergeant and Louis were still standing. Everyone else, including the entirety of the planet, had been killed.

The brass had awarded both Louis and the sergeant several medals and decorations for their actions, but none of it had made any lick of difference. The decorations had been beyond hollow. What was the glory in being awarded the Gold Star when you knew deep down within your soul that someday, somewhere in the future, your species would cease to exist? Louis had been promoted and became the new sergeant, as well as being placed as second-in-command of Delta Company. The new billet had its advantages - a somewhat decent pay upgrade being one of those - but by and large, it came with far more disadvantages. The biggest of which being the fact that Louis was now relied upon to send soldiers to their deaths. Louis felt responsible for every single death beneath his command.

After landing on the ring, over two dozen ODSs had lost their lives following orders by Louis. Delta-Four had made it out simply because Louis had taken command of the squad.

He wasn't about to let any of them die. Not today.

A large Covenant patrol was trying to see that objective to a resounding failure.

Grunts, two squads of jackals, and several elites were slowly advancing on Delta-Four's position at the top of a hill, overlooking a thick forest. Stones and trees and rocks littered the surrounding area, providing plenty of cover for both sides. The two jackal squads didn't need to use any of it; they were both stacked together in tight phalanxes, successfully withstanding a hail of gunfire from uphill. Grunts skittered around and fired off wild plasma shots, running from one spot to the next, largely unorganized. The elites were struggling to maintain dominion over the forces, as the ODSs were relentless in the downpour of bullets and grenades.

"Sevv! Arkadios! 10 'O clock!" Louis bellowed as he reloaded his MA5C.

Sevv and Arkadios skirted around the left flank of the hill, dipped into cover behind a short stone, and opened fire on several grunts pressing up the hill in a mad charge. The grunts were shredded round after round, their bodies collapsing into each other and rolling back down the hill in a pile.

Louis slapped the magazine into the MA5C and the counter jumped back to 32. He peeked out of cover for a brief moment and then ducked back down, barely escaping a round from a plasma rifle. The two jackal squads had split up - one broke off to the right, and the other steadily pressing forwards on the left. Both squads had two elites behind them, perfectly covered by the overlapping energy shields. The grunts were simply a distracting force to draw fire and keep the squad's heads down, while the jackals marched the elites into position to strike at close-range. Louis couldn't let that happen.

"Focus on the grunts, you two!" Louis shouted at Sevv and Arkadios. They returned fire in unison, trading shots with the grunt party and scoring hits.

Louis sprinted out of cover to Lysimachus and Psamathe's position, dipping across the top of the hill as fast as he could. He slid across slick grass right into their spot. A quick hail of plasma fire

burned into the large boulder, peeling away at its surface layer by layer. Louis popped off a few suppressive shots in response.

"Those jackals are trying to close the distance between us. We can't let that happen," Louis said to the pair. The two ODSs nodded in unison. "Slow them down as much as possible - use grenades if you have to."

"Sounds like a plan," Lysimachus commented, his gun already discharging at the encroaching enemy. Psamathe nodded and took aim with her BR55.

Louis waited for a lull in the action before backpedaling to Helen's position deep within the branches of a large tree, sitting high up off the ground. Every half minute, her rifle discharged and dropped off another target. She'd already cut the elites down to four. Her battle-sense was most impressive, and Louis had caught onto it early. She was the only member of Delta-Four who didn't need directing in firefights. Helen always seemed to be doing exactly what she needed to be doing, and it impressed Louis greatly. If they made it out of this, Louis would see to it that she take over platoon commander for the 2nd. After what'd happened to Joker onboard the Pillar of Autumn, the position needed filling.

At the base of Helen's tree was the new guy. His unblemished armor was barely seen behind the tree trunk that he was in cover at. Louis sprinted up the hill to the tree and clambered over the log, landing swiftly next to the newbie. Several plasma bolts following him over and narrowly missed his back. The heat from the rounds had Louis sweating in his armor.

"We're going around the right flank; stick close to me and keep your head down."

Louis broke off from cover and burst to the right, shrugging past rocks and bushes alike. Occasional plasma shots streaked overhead, but they were largely inaccurate. A constant staccato of rifle discharges held the Covenant at bay - for the moment. Delta-Four's formation was solid, but it wouldn't hold forever against superior numbers. Not to mention the limited supply of ammo that'd been shrinking at an alarming rate.

Louis slid down the right side of the hill, tucked his legs in and rolled, and came to a stop at ground level behind a massive tree. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the Newbie do the same, crawling into position to the other side of the tree.

The tree line encircled the hill that Delta-Four was on, separating the massive rise from the rest of the forest. At peak level, the hill could oversee the top of the canopy. Louis had thought that by reaching that spot, he could successfully make contact with any other UNSC forces stranded on the ring. Technically speaking, Louis had no hard evidence that anyone else was even alive. The last thing he'd seen before touchdown had been the 'Autumn itself gearing up for a crash-landing, with numerous escape pods being strafed by Covenant banshees. Louis tossed those thoughts to the back of his head.

He cut a path around the edge of the treeline, carefully keeping one eye off to his right in case any other Covenant showed up. The two jackal squads had made progress and were roughly halfway up the

slope, edging ever closer to Delta-Four. Bullets pinged off their shields and occasionally lit up the elites behind them as Lysimachus and Psamathe fought to keep them at bay. A distinct sniper round cut clean through the head of an elite. Dark blood ruptured from the fatal wound and it toppled backwards, collapsing onto the ground in a heap and rolling backwards; it'd died before it hit the ground. The elite minor next to it roared out loud and fired off a three-round burst into Helen's position. From where Louis stood, he couldn't see if the shots connected. The elite ducked back down even lower behind the jackals. Several grunts surged forward from the rear, their guns blazing and burning away cover with every shot.

Louis looked over his shoulder. "Come on!"

He rounded the right flank of the hill until he could clearly see all the Covenant forces. One of the jackals had caught sight of him as well. It screeched loudly to its allies as Louis opened fire. The scream turned into a gurgle as rounds tore through its exposed neck area, severing the windpipe. It clutched at the wound before it hit the ground, twitching around violently. With a partial element of surprise, Louis and the Newbie managed to drop several grunts and jackals in combined firepower. Ammunition tore a chunk through the Covenant positions, scattering them briefly and causing momentary confusion.

In response, the single elite major bellowed an order, and all the rest of the jackals re-positioned back into one tight squad, forming a tight triangle with the elites in the middle. Yellow plasma bolts sizzled through the air and forced Louis back into cover. Pieces of wood flecked over his armor and melted into the tree. The Newbie raised his M7S Caseless and opened fire from his position while Louis was suppressed. Several grunts and a single jackal fell from the effort, opening a brief hole in the pyramid. Louis leaned out of cover and opened fire on it. He made contact with a pair of the jackals. Their body armor absorbed most of the damage, and his shots only served to stagger them. With due diligence, another jackal propped up in place of the dead one, sealing the phalanx once again.

Despite the combined fronts, the jackal-wall held. Another sniper round pierced the air, but it merely shrugged off the shoulder of the elite major. Louis was relieved to see that Helen was alive, but he knew as well that she was running low on ammo.

A plasma grenade sailed through the air from behind the phalanx wall and landed somewhere atop the hill. It exploded and kicked up plumes of dirt and mud, vaporizing anything unfortunate enough to be within the blast range.

While Delta-Four was scrambling to reorient after the explosion, the jackals pressed forward at a deadly pace. Louis and the Newbie now had a better angle to work with where they could see within the rear of the formation. Louis pointed out targets and took aim at the legs of the jackals, hoping to clip them up and falter the shield wall. Dirt spewed out of the ground from missed rounds, but the rest of them connected. Louis and the Newbie hammered into the backs of the far side of the formation. Several of the jackals clutched at wounds and fell to the ground, their body armor slick with blood and torn flesh. Shields sizzled out of existence, and finally, the jackal-wall collapsed for good.

At the same time, the remaining 3 elites tore through the formation with weapons blazing, charging straight for Delta-Four's position. Despite a combined effort, the elite's energy shielding withstood the barrage of gunfire.

"NO!" Louis bellowed, squeezing the trigger until the magazine ran dry. His rounds harmlessly flew wild, doing next to nothing.

Just as the elites reached the crest of the hill, Louis watched as a single rocket burst forth from within the forest in the direction of where the Covenant had come from, barreling towards the three elites. It was a direct hit on the elite major, the explosion momentarily releasing a miniature sun into mid-air. Chunks of dirt and mud plumed outwards, and the other 2 elites were blown away to either side, their armor completely shattered. A slight shockwave kissed the surrounding grass, sending a wave shimmering in a ripple. The elite major was blown to smithereens, its remains showering anything within vicinity of the explosion. The rest of Delta-Four was only just coming out of cover.

Louis felt his mouth still agape, and shut it instinctively. He looked to the source of the rocket.

Emerging from the woods was a humanoid war machine standing somewhere around 7 feet tall, covered from head to toe in an ash grey suit of armor that looked impregnable. Several weapons were hung over its back and shoulders, including Covenant weaponry. It cast aside the barrel-smoking M41 Rocket Launcher with ease, sauntering across the field towards Louis. The sight was daunting. Despite the ridiculous amount of equipment it was bearing, it moved gracefully and fluidly; it looked inhuman.

Louis had never seen one before, but he knew without doubt that he was looking at a live Spartan. The stories were true...

Louis glanced over his shoulder. "Word of advice, Newbie? You see one of these guys in the field, you shut up and do whatever he tells you to."

The Newbie nodded and followed Louis out to meet the Spartan.

* * *

><p>Coario had first done an HEV drop years ago in a training operation. At the time, he'd been nearly frightened. No matter how hard he fought the fear, the only thought that kept running through his mind was that the HEV would be his coffin. Instructor Ambrose had warned that if anyone backed out of the drop, they'd be shoved off the ship by Ambrose himself.<p>

Dropping from low-orbit didn't feel good. It was a rough, haggard experience all the way down. Ultimately, the only factors that kept you alive were gravity and the pod itself.

The results after landing were mostly broken pieces of armor plating scattered about on the ground and a torn open door-frame. Maybe even some leftover biofoam cans and first-aid kits. That's what was normally found at an HEV crash site.

Coario had found much more at the ODS'T pod site. First was the bodies. They'd littered the field, creating a miniature graveyard site filled with soldiers. The bodies of the ODS'Ts had been covered with blood and plasma burns and energy sword gashes. Those were the ones that'd been intact. Some of them had been separated into pieces or blown in half or vaporized completely. Second was the smell. Whilst searching the site, Coario had taken his helmet off to gather in the entirety of the scene. The smell had been horrific and burning and piercing, and he'd cursed underneath his breath. Charred flesh had cast a sickly scent into the air. It'd taken Coario longer than it should have to count the bodies.

But that wasn't the only thing he'd found. Covenant bodies had covered the area as well - well over a hundred of them. Grunts, jackals, elites, and even a pair of hunters had been slaughtered in the battle. Even a destroyed banshee rested buried headfirst into a crater, the remains of its pilots nowhere to be found. The ODS'Ts had traded roughly 2 dozen men for nearly 200 Covenant troops. They'd fought valiantly. Coario had investigated the scene in detail, and from what he could tell, the ODS'Ts had been surrounded with only their HEV pods for cover. Spent shell casings and empty weapons had been strewn about, including two empty rocket launchers. Coario had taken the time to replenish his personal supply of ammo.

Not all of the troopers had died, though.

Master Sergeant Louis Leppard was probably the reason for that.

Coario stood a head taller than Leppard, but the Sergeant carried himself with calm authority and confidence. Leppard's armor was criss-crossed in burn marks and slashes and ripples, a testament to the fierce battle he'd seen all throughout both Reach and on the ring. Burnt yellow skin and tightly cut black hair, Leppard might be considered a dashing fellow.

The rest of his squad looked about the same in terms of wear and tear on the armor, except for one of the ODS'Ts in particular; a younger guy who they all simply referred to as the 'Newbie'. Overall, the squad looked like a tight and capable bunch. They must be, considering all they'd been through over the past 24 hours.

"Soon as we hit the ground, they swarmed on us like bees. Elites. Hunters. Even a banshee squadron. Been a long time since I was in a fight that bitter. I tried my best to repel the attack, but there were too many of them, and we were surrounded. I... I had to create a distraction to try and save who ever I could. I ordered good men and women to their deaths to save Delta-Four, and my own skin. I try to tell myself that we all would've died had I done nothing, but... It's not easy."

Leppard was talking to Coario alone. The rest of Delta-Four was up ahead by about 10 meters, their eyes peeled for any signs of Covenant as they cut a path through the forest towards Alpha Base. Usually, conventional UNSC forces 'lacked the tactical efficiency to operate alongside Spartans as direct support units in special operations'. That was the official wording for it. In reality, it only meant two things: conventional troops weren't skilled enough, and they simply couldn't keep up. ODS'Ts were the closest it came to being Spartans without being Spartans. Coario had run the calculation and figured

that he could spare the small risk and let Delta-Four pick up some of the slack. They'd already proven themselves adept.

"Shit must be bad if they sent you out into this mess to find us." Leppard said as they crossed over a small streambed. Tiny rocks and pebbles split the clear water up as it flowed into one direction.

"It's not as bad as it could be," Coario replied as he thought about the solid defenses of Alpha Base.

"Tell me - is the rest of the Company there? Is McKay still alive? The last I saw, everyone was still onboard the Autumn, fighting off the Covenant troops that broke through to the HEV-Ejection chamber."

"Yes, and yes."

"I'm glad you showed up when you did. We would've been baked for certain. I can't afford to lose anybody else, not after today. Helen over there," Leppard said, nodding in the direction of the squad sniper. She moved swiftly and carefully around the trees and bushes, a long SRS cradled in her arms like a baby. "She's a damn good marine if I ever saw one. We need people like her if we want to win this war. Sevv, too. Hell, all of them. I can't help but feel as if I'm dedicated to this squad now. Out of all the ones I could've seen away from that drop-site, I'm glad it was Delta-Four."

"I'm recommending Sevv to fill in as squad leader; Xanthippos got killed in the drop. And I'm making certain that Helen takes over after what happened to Joker on the 'Autumn.'"

Coario had heard about what'd happened to Joker when he'd been in Alpha Base. Everyone had heard about what'd happened to Joker. It hadn't been pretty.

"We have to make it back first."

"If you don't mind me asking, but why did you leave that M41 behind? We could've used that."

"That was my last rocket."

The squad marched along in a slightly staggered line, with just enough spread to be considered a loose formation. Overhead, the day cycle was beginning to kick in full swing, and light was bursting through the tree canopy up above. Shadows danced across different surfaces, silently matching the ODS-T-Spartan hybrid squad stride for stride. Coario made certain that he kept one eye on his motion tracker and one eye scanning about. He wouldn't be caught off guard like he'd been with the commandos. The pain in his arm had died down to only a small background effect, and Coario felt ready to take on anything. To his right, Leppard looked closely at Coario.

"You look like you've been through some shit. I know those cuts anywhere," Leppard said, nodding towards the gash in Coario's shoulder armor. "Hate those damn swords."

Master Sergeant Leppard talked a lot, but Coario could tell that it was just the excitement of meeting a Spartan.

"I saw one of those things cut through half our platoon on my first deployment. Very first mission ever, and half my platoon was cut to ribbons by one elite. Never been more scared before in my life."

Just before Coario could say anything, he saw something inconspicuous. "Get down!"

The entire squad dropped immediately and melded into cover. Coario crouch walked towards the head of the formation and hit the dirt next to Helen. He stuck out his hand - a request for her sniper rifle. She hesitated for a moment and then handed it over, shaking her head slightly.

"Stay down and stay still," Coario said over his shoulder before crawling forward on his belly at a brisk pace.

He slid along the ground as low as he could, using plants and trees to mask his movements. Small bugs crawled over his armor and his helmet. Red dots swarmed his motion tracker as a result. Something resembling a spider crawled into a corner of Coario's helmet, holding its position at the bottom right of the visor. It didn't block Coario's view. He ignored it and pulled himself over a series of thick tree roots.

Magnifying his visor to 2x, Coario froze into position.

Somewhere around a mile up ahead was a single spec-ops elite regular. It was installing something into the ground, but Coario couldn't tell what it was. It looked like plasma mines. The elite was alone.

Strange.

Coario watched it for several moments longer, waiting to see what it would do. Light bounced off its shiny armor, shimmering brightly in the heat.

Back on Reach, Jun had told Coario that the SRS99, with AP ammunition, could take the hat off an elite at 2000 yards - and that AP rounds weren't cheap. Coario had been known about that well before then, but he hadn't mentioned it. Coario was an experienced sharpshooter, and had popped targets from as far at 1500 yards away. Jun was the only person Coario knew who could outshoot him.

Coario set the bipod onto the surface of a tree root and stabilized it, making certain that it was in a solid position. He conformed his body to match the surface beneath him and relaxed his shoulders. Looking through the scope, he had a clear line of sight on the elite. The built-in range scanner measured 2077.7 yards from where he lay to where the scope was aiming at. Slowly, he centered the aiming reticule on the exposed neck of the elite. The range scanner dropped to 2077.2. Coario then raised the end of the barrel up barely half a centimeter, and the reticule hovered just above the elite. Checking the numbers built-in to the scope, he adjusted the aim once again to account for the slight windage. He swiveled the barrel to the right 5 millimeters and held it there. Then he breathed in and out slowly, relaxing himself even more.

The elite looked at something on its wrist briefly, and then stood up and walked several paces forward. Having memorized the positioning of the reticule relative to the elite's neck, Coario adjusted his aim accordingly and with ease.

It paused, checked out the thing on its wrist once again, and then walked off, heading for an unknown location. Coario would have to shoot a moving target. He was a Spartan, but he wasn't perfect. It'd been a long time since Coario had doubted his skills. He considered letting the elite go, but thought better of it. An active spec-ops elite operating in the area would be a problem sooner or later.

Coario tracked its movements and kept his aim lined up as well as he could. He'd done harder things before. Worst case scenario, he'd have to fight his way out of a snag. With Delta-Four as support, it wouldn't be too hard of a challenge.

He held his breath, counted down from three, and fired.

And missed.

The round sailed just over the elite's head and blew a hole into the tree beside it. Wood erupted from the collision and tore nearly half the tree trunk away. Smoke disbursed from the mini explosion and dissipated quickly. The elite dived to the ground out of view. A small series of harmless plasma rounds flew into Coario's direction; it'd taken note of where the shot had come from.

Damn.

Coario stood up from his spot and rushed back to the ODSs, carrying the sniper rifle in one hand and unslinging his DMR in the other. He leaped into cover next to Helen and handed her the rifle.

"Shoulda let me do it, Spartan," she said, taking her rifle back and scanning the woods up ahead.

Coario ignored the comment and rounded up the rest of Delta-Four. If they didn't duck this area soon, the heat would be on. Coario had had enough hot pursuit for one day. "Everyone form up on me and stay close. Don't fall behind."

* * *

><p>They'd made good time over hilly areas and canyons alike, and for a while, it'd seemed like they'd never quite get back to Alpha Base. Banshee sightings had ramped up a tad, but none of them had spotted the squad. Covenant patrols and hunter teams had been popping up all over the place. It took a tactical mind to dodge each and every one of them, and Coario had managed to do just that. It shouldn't be long before Alpha was in sight.<p>

Coario had stopped for the moment to allow Delta-Four a brief moment of rest. They were ODSs, but they weren't designed for the pace that Spartans worked at, and Coario had been the one taking lead ever since the encounter with the elite spec-ops.

Resting within a small cave just on the edge of a massive gorge, Delta-Four looked beat and battered. They probably hadn't had sleep

in two days' time. Coario could operate under those circumstances fairly okay, but non-spartans would be a liability in the field in that position. To top it off, the ODSs had been in the thick ever since the boarding parties hit the 'Autumn. Delta-Four needed the rest.

Coario was sitting outside the cave behind a bush with fruit stemming from it, keeping watch by himself. He was tempted to snatch some of the fruit and eat it, but as far as he knew, it was filled with poison. Still. Coario hadn't eaten anything since he'd awoken on the 'Autumn. Every second he sat there, he felt his resistance ebbing away. Instructor Ambrose had warned about taking unnecessary risks.

Taking his helmet off, Coario figured he would be alright. The fruit were bite sized and looked like a cross between black berries and strawberries. He grabbed one and split it open with his gloved hands. Dark black juice oozed out onto his fingers. It didn't look dangerous. He held it to his nose and it smelled strange but not unpleasant; like fresh air from an AC unit. Coario tossed the broken fruit aside, grabbed a handful more of them, and popped them into his mouth.

Instant gratification.

Coario had fed off the land many times before, but not once had it been like this. It filled his mouth completely - a perfect balance between sweet and slightly salty. He pulled another handful and munched them down as well.

There was movement to his left and Coario instinctively withdrew his sidearm. The barrel stared right into the face of one of the ODSs. The name on the breastplate read PSAMATHE. She had her helmet off, revealing a sharp caramel face with lush black hair styled in cornrow braiding. The name fit her appearance - Psamathe was a beautiful woman. The scar on her cheek only added to it. Coario holstered his weapon and apologized.

"So, you _are _human," she said, taking a seat next to Coario, her eyes taking in the berry stains on his chin. Coario wiped it off with the back of his hand.

"Tell me," Coario said, prying off another of the berries, munching on it briefly. "What's with the names?"

Psamathe smiled at that. "Oh, yeah, that. Trust me, it's just a crazy coincidence. The other squads call us the Delta-Greeks."

Coario had been wondering about it the instant he'd come across the squad. Over half of its members' names were from ancient Greece and mythology. Psamathe was right - it was a strange coincidence. Lysimachus. Helen. Arkadios. Psamathe. The KIA squadleader, Xanthippos.

"Unusual," Coario said.

"I think the requisitions officers are playing a joke on us, but whatever. Those things good?" She asked pointing to the mystery fruit Coario was laying waste to. He'd nearly stripped half the bush.

"Good enough."

Psamathe grabbed a handful herself and ate them. "This place is incredible. I can't believe some aliens created it. You could live here - it's so much like Sigma Octanus."

Funny. Ever since he'd landed, Coario had been comparing the surface to that of Onyx. Everything here had reminded him of the Spartan-III homeworld. To Psamathe, it was like being on Sigma Octanus IV. Both were planets which fully supported human life. Overhead, the day cycle was just beginning to die down. On a world, Coario guessed that this would be around the time the sun would first start to falling. It was somewhere around a few hours past mid-day. They would be back at Alpha Base by midnight. If they weren't killed before then.

"I can take over watch if you need some rest," Psamathe told him.

"I'm fine."

They sat together in silence for the next few minutes. Coario was lost deep in thought.

If things had gone as planned, then the Master Chief - John - should've made it back to Alpha Base with the package a couple hours ago. The 'package' consisted of Captain Keyes, as well as a dozen marines who'd been stuck aboard the 'Autumn. It was a longshot to hope that the operation would be a 100% success. Coario had been in the belly of Covenant ships before, and it was anything but simple. Simply maneuvering their complex layouts was a daunting task. The Truth and Reconciliation would be crawling with veteran Covenant troops. Not only was it the key ship in the Covenant fleet, but it was housing a high value target.

The sooner everyone was regrouped and rounded up, the sooner they could figure out a way off the ring. At the moment, Coario had no idea how that would be accomplished. With the Pillar of Autumn out of commission, getting off the ring was a problem that might not be solved.

They'd waited enough time.

Coario stood and put his helmet back on. Through the visor, the world around him looked even more detailed and crisp than it already did without. Out in the distance, there was no movement besides the natural sway of the forest. A riverbed split the cave off from the rest of the world to the right, and within it, Coario could see aquatic wildlife surfing the waters down below. Were they artificially made like the rest of the ring? Coario didn't know and shrugged it off. He gathered up his weapon from the ground and walked past Psamathe into the cave.

The ODSTs were all set and ready to go. Coario stopped in the entrance and took a quick look at all of them in turn.

"We're in the homestretch," he told them.

"We're ready," Leppard said, stepping forth with his MA5C in tow.

* * *

><p>Ascendant Justice, DDS-Class Flagship Carrier, in low orbit above Installation 04**

Council of Masters chambers, Prophet of Stewardship's dominion

1623 Hours - GST

Nato 'Kusovai bowed in deference to the prophet in front of him, shame burning his facial features. It exuded from him like a pestilence. Nato could feel the demeaning gaze searing into his very soul. Even the Honor Guards' gazes felt tangible. Like a weight on his shoulders.

"I denied your counterpart, Zuka, permission to hunt the Demon. In his place, I entrusted you with the task of finding and eliminating the second demon. You failed me."

Each word stung. The implications of that one statement could very well mean the Mark of Shame. Were that to be the case, Nato would prefer death.

"I see I was wrong to place faith in your abilities, Nato," the Prophet continued on. "You wasted the lives of your entire squad, and you have naught to show for it."

Nato gritted his mandibles. He would not rely on excuses as a crutch, but he would explain himself. Despite the prophet's pious and holy attitude, Nato deserved at least that much from him. Nato had served with due diligence for years. "This demon was unlike anything I have ever seen. Yes, I am responsible for our loss, but you must liste-"

"-I 'must' not do anything, Sangheili." The prophet said with a wave of its hand. "You've shown me just how shallow your obedience is."

Anger began surging forth from within Nato. Stewardship's disdain for Sangheili was well-known throughout the military circle of the Covenant. As a result, the prophet often lost reason when it came to conflicts with Nato's species. Nato would not stand for it.

"If you allow these two demons to run rampant upon the Holy Ring, we will lose this battle! Surely even you can see this!" Nato responded, his voice rising naturally.

"What I can see is heresy. The gods have no need for your kind." Stewardship said, standing from his high perch. "Guards - take him."

Nato rushed to his feet, bellowing his rage. "You fool! I have done nothing to jeopardize our Covenant! We will suffer because of your foolhardiness!"

Several honor guards gripped his arms, restraining Nato at once. He fought back, shoving one to the side and landing a solid blow to the other's face. A right cross was swung in Nato's direction by the third guard. Nato ducked beneath it and brought his fist up into the

guard's belly, doubling it over. Before he could do anything else, dozens of arms seized him all over his body. Nato squirmed and struggled, but his efforts were futile. They carried him out of the chambers, yelling and kicking.

End
file.